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My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"Just a Bit More Like This"



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The Person I Like Lives with Me

The World after Making Up My Mind

Mizuto Irido

When I got my first girlfriend in middle school, the world sparkled. I had been more than happy to think cliché things like that back then, but now, with more life experience under my belt, the world remained the same as always. My morning lethargy, my messy room—everything was so normal and dull. Although, I guess there was *one* thing that I'd begun seeing differently.

“Ah—”

Right as I left my room, a pajama-clad Yume exited hers as well, her long, black hair all over the place. *Did she just untie it or something?* Also, maybe it was because she'd just woken up, or maybe it was because she'd yet to put in her contacts, but she looked a little peeved.

Yume scrambled to cover her mouth when she saw me. “W-Wait, what? You're up already?!”

“Yeah, you know... It happens.”

“Ugh... How could I have been so careless?!”

Yume covered her face with her hands before rubbing it as if she was washing it. *You do know this isn't exactly the first time I'm seeing you right after you wake up, right?* But I had to take into consideration that it was apparently distressing for girls to be seen before they put their faces on, especially by a non-blood relative like me.

Middle school me would've reacted differently. I might've been a little flustered by her unguarded appearance or been disillusioned by her carelessly unprepared face. But that was all because I'd *only* known Yume as a girl—as a girlfriend—back then.

I'm different now, though. “Don't worry about it.” *I know you as my stepsibling. I know you as a person. I've become disillusioned.* There was no use worrying over something that had already happened. “You can let your guard down at home. You're always trying to keep up appearances. It's gotta be exhausting.”

Yume peeked at my face through a gap in her fingers. “Are you...being considerate?”

“Yeah, for what it's worth.”

“Thanks...but...” Yume turned her back to me and opened her door. “I have my pride!” Then she slammed the door behind her,

disappearing behind it.

Yeah...it really doesn't seem like I can go back to seeing the world like I did in middle school.

Small but Not Insignificant

Yume Irido

After Mizuto caught sight of my slovenly appearance, I checked myself over and over again in the mirror before finally leaving my room. My one saving grace was that there weren't any drool stains on my face when he saw me. *Urgh, I've thought about this a lot, but it is really inconvenient when the person you like lives with you!* It becomes a lot harder to *only* show the side of yourself that you want them to see.

Although, I suppose the silver lining is that the person I'm interested in also happened to be my ex—an ex who's already seen me in all sorts of situations that I never wanted him to see me in. Him seeing me right after I woke up every now and then wasn't anything new. That being said...it didn't make it any easier.

Argh! I can't believe this is how I'm starting my day...especially when it's such an important one. If this is how I'm kicking things off, I worry about how the rest will go.

"Morning, Yume! I made some toast!" mom said as I entered the living room.

"Okay."

I sat at the table and began munching on the toast. As I did, I noticed that there was a plate with only bread crumbs left on it at Mizuto's place at the table. He was nowhere to be found, though. Most likely, he'd gone back to his room to change.

I wolfed down the rest of my toast and black tea. "Thanks!" I called out before heading for the dressing room to brush my teeth and check my appearance one more time.

He turned to look at me, and then moved over a little, opening up some space at the sink without saying a word. *Well, it'll be awkward if I leave now and wait for him to be done. Plus, it's not like there's not enough space for me.* With that, I stood next to him and grabbed my toothbrush.

Looking in the mirror, I saw the reflection of a guy and a girl brushing their teeth, without a word being exchanged. Of course, this wasn't a new situation for us, but even so, for some reason, it suddenly felt strange. But the strangest thing of all was how familiar it felt.

If this had been me in middle school, or when I'd first moved in, I wouldn't have been able to stand here in silence, completely

unaffected by the fact that our shoulders were just a hair's breadth away from each other.

Now, it all felt so natural and matter-of-fact. If anything, I felt a sense of ease being like this. It'd only been six months since I started living here, and yet I'd changed so much. I was in awe at how well humans could adapt.

Mizuto picked up his cup, filled it with water, and gargled. Right after he finished, he moved to wipe his mouth with his sleeve.

"Nn!" I immediately reacted to stop him, my toothbrush still in my mouth. "Mm!" I thrust a towel at him.

Mizuto grunted, taking it from me and wiping his mouth. I couldn't tell if that noise was supposed to express his annoyance or thanks.



I gargled after him, and when I finished, he handed me the towel. While I wiped my mouth, Mizuto moved to exit the room. *It's nice how fun getting ready for school is. I should put my lip balm on now.*

As I took it out from my pocket, I noticed, in the reflection in the mirror, that Mizuto had turned to look at me.

"Yes...?" I asked, making eye contact.

He stared right back at me. "Today's your first day, right?"

"Huh?"

"On the student council." He paused before continuing. "Good luck."

Our school had just finished elections for student council president the other day, but there had been only one candidate. Essentially, voting had been nothing more than a formality. This person had become our school's new student council president with a ninety-eight percent vote of confidence. Her name? Suzuri Kurenai.

Upon her recommendation, I was instated as one of the members as well. Today would be my first day on the job. *I'm pretty sure I only mentioned it to Mizuto in passing, but...it looks like he remembered anyway.*

"Thanks... I'm gonna do my best."

Mizuto nodded and left. After he did, I returned my gaze to the mirror and began applying lip balm.

"Yeah." *I think I put it on really nicely today.*

Forever Third Place

Waves of anxiety and excitement washed over me as I looked up at the sign that read "Student Council." This was where the members who brought our school together convened. *This* was a room that only the chosen few could enter. *I might be hyping everything up a little too much, though.*

Even so, up until now, I'd always simply gone home after the school day ended. It was strange to be standing in front of a room that wasn't my classroom. That fact alone was enough for an indescribable sense of euphoria to well up inside me.

"Go time." I gathered my confidence and raised my hand to knock on the door. *Oh, wait.* I stopped myself as soon as I remembered something that the vice president—I mean, the president—had told me. "*Visitors knock. Student council members need only enter,*" she'd said.

I lowered my hand to the handle and quickly slid the door open. "H-Hello!"

First impressions were important, so I got a little too excited and

accidentally raised my voice a little louder than I'd meant to. The room itself didn't seem too special or anything. There was a set of couches right by the door, which seemed to be for visitors. Then, in the back of the room, there was a long table and a whiteboard, both most likely used for meetings.

The sides of the room were lined with cabinets that were packed with files, someone's stuffed animals, and even boxes of tabletop games. What all of these areas were lacking, though, was people. I was completely alone.

Where is everyone? I looked around as I stepped farther into the room and then, suddenly, I caught sight of someone from the corner of my eye.

"Eek!" I reflexively recoiled a little as the other person looked up at me with wary eyes like a cat. She was pretty small—so much so that she could maybe even have given Akatsuki-san a run for her money. She had short hair, styled in a way similar to those of girls who played sports. She had a youthful face, which was symmetrical and cute. But right now, her eyebrows were furrowed for some reason, giving off the impression that she was annoyed.

I think she's a first-year, judging from her small stature. Her tie's red too. Although, there was one part of her that made me question her age. *Wh-Why are they so huge?* Her breasts were enormous—possibly the same size as Higashira-san's or even Madoka-san's. But then again, maybe they only looked big because of her small stature. Regardless, there was no doubt in my mind that taking into consideration her height-to-chest-size ratio, she'd incur the wrath of Akatsuki-san to an extreme degree.

She was staring at the shelf right next to the door. That was most likely why I hadn't noticed her at first. *She is a student council member, right? She should be a new member too if she's a first-year.*

All the greetings I'd prepared completely slipped my mind due to her sudden appearance. All I could do was stand in place as the petite yet big-chested girl scrutinized me.

"You're...Yume Irido-san, right?" Her voice had a tinge of animosity to it.

Uh... Huh? Have we met before? Did I do something to you? "Y-Yes, I am."

"I'm Asuhain." She closed the distance between us and glared up at me.

"O-Oh. A-Asu...Asuhain-san?"

"Yes. That's my name. It's written with the characters for 'tomorrow, a leaf will fall at the hospital.'"

That's a very...cursed way to explain the spelling of your name. How do I even respond? "Oh, uh... Nice to meet you?"

“Likewise.”

“U-Uh...are you also on the student council?”

“Yes. General affairs.”

“O-Oh. I’m the secretary. I look forward to working with—”

“Is that it?”

“Huh?” *What else is there?!*

Asuhain-san puffed out her cute cheeks and came even closer to me. *H-Hey! Your boobs! They’re gonna touch me!*

“You still don’t recognize me?! I’m the same Asuhain who placed third in both the midterms and finals!”

“Oh, wow. Third? That’s impressive!”

“Says the person who firmly held first and second place!” She suddenly grabbed me by my shoulders and shook me back and forth.

“Eep!”

“What am I, chopped liver?! I’ve been working my butt off to surpass you and your brother, and now you’re telling me that you don’t even know who I am?!”

Oh, now I get it. If she’s third, then that means she’s scored right below me and Mizuto. Well...I guess she’s not wrong. I only really cared about his placement and mine.

“I-I’m...sorry?”

“I don’t want you to *apologize*! All I want is to see you shaking with anger when you see your name below mine!” *Competitive doesn’t even begin to describe her.* She continued gripping my shoulders and glaring right into my eyes. “I’m aiming to be the next president. I’ll push past you and achieve my goal. Then, you’ll have no choice but to remember my name.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, don’t worry—I know your name now, Asuhain-san.”

“I don’t mean *now*!”

What do you want from me?! I’d apparently become colleagues with a very spirited girl—though, in a much different way than Akatsuki-san.

Asuhain-san exhaled, released my shoulders, and turned around. “By the way, where’s your brother?”

“Oh, Mizuto? Apparently, he wasn’t asked to join.”

“I see... Hmph. I heard he has a girlfriend. It makes sense that someone distracted by romance wouldn’t be chosen to join this prestigious student council.”

I shut my mouth and smiled. What she said applied to not only me, but also President Kurenai. I decided it was best not to mention that the president herself was distracted by romance to the point that she’d attempted to seduce a fellow student council member. *Yeah, let’s keep that to myself.*

I had to say, though, the rumor about Mizuto and Higashira-san had really gotten around. Even if there was only romantic interest flowing one way between them, there was no way that people like Asuhain-san, who didn't have their fingers on the pulse of the relationship, would know that.

"Hm? By the way..." I started.

"What?"

"What's your first name? I'm really sorry, but I don't remember it."

"My...first name..." She suddenly frowned and her eyes shifted down to the side.

A Cheerful, Flirty Upperclassman Who Has Something Off about Her

"Oh! Ran! You're here already?"

I turned around to face the source of the voice and saw a long-haired girl happily enter the room. She was on the taller side and she wore her hair in the somewhat childish style of half down and half up in pigtails. Her school bag, hanging from her shoulder, had a mascot key chain dangling from it. As rude as this may sound, she gave off flirty vibes.

Her green ribbon tied across her chest told me that she was a second-year. The upperclassman with childish tastes ran up to Asuhain-san and squeezed her small body as if she were a stuffed animal.

"You got here so fast! Did you wanna see me that badly?"

"I simply wanted to arrive fifteen minutes early. Please get off of me, senpai."

"Aw, the cold shoulder? Such a cutie-pie!"

"I am neither a cutie nor a pie!" Asuhain-san expressionlessly ripped herself off of our upperclassman.

The older girl looked disappointed, but when she turned to me, her face lit up. "Oh, you're Irido-chan, right? I've heard about you from Suzurin! You're, like, really smart, right?"

"O-Oh, no! I-I'm not that special!" *Also, who's "Suzurin"? The president?*

"You must be a pretty impressive person to have caught Suzurin's eye. You should be more confident! Brag about it! Oh, wait, I haven't introduced myself yet. Aisa Aso! I'm a second-year and the new vice president! Looking forward to working with you, frosh!" she said, puffing out her chest. Her face was so filled with confidence, it was as if she was trying to show me how I should introduce myself.

Whenever I met a girl for the first time, I'd find myself

unconsciously checking out her proportions. Maybe this extreme habit had rubbed off on me after all the time spent with Akatsuki-san. That being said, Aso-senpai had a pretty decent body. She had a slim waist, a butt on the smaller side, and an overall thin body that rivaled a model's, but somehow, she had a bigger chest than I... *Hm? Wait. Maybe it's just my imagination, but something feels off.*

"So you've already said hi to Ran, right? She sees you as a rival for some reason. Was she rude to you at all?"

"N-No. Not at all. Nothing to worry about. Totally."

"Suspicious. She *was* rude to you, wasn't she? Good grief...but she's cute, so I forgive her." Aso-senpai hugged Asuhain-san again, but she didn't resist this time. Instead, she just ignored her, utterly nonplussed.

From what I could gather, Asuhain-san had been recruited to the student council by Aso-senpai just like I'd been recruited by the president. *Would it be rude for me to ask them how it all happened? I don't remember them being on the cultural festival committee. These two seem pretty close, especially since Aso-senpai's calling Asuhain-san by her first name.*

"Oh, your first name's Ran?" I asked, suddenly realizing.

"I suppose it is." Her face scrunched up a little for some reason.

I got the feeling that she didn't want to say her first name earlier either. *I wonder why.* "Ran Asuhain... I like the sound of that."

"I know, right? It gives off rich vibes somehow!" Aso-senpai enthusiastically agreed.

"Please do not call me by my first name. I don't like it," Asuhain-san said bitterly. "Only refer to me by my last name."

"Is it okay for me to ask why?" I cautiously asked.

Asuhain-san looked down and paused before continuing. "I was bullied by boys in elementary school. They would call me 'Hard-on Ran.'"

Oh... What a dirty joke. Being teased about that was definitely something that would happen in elementary school—probably in the latter half. That was the age when kids were eager to use dirty vocab that they saw in manga and dictionaries.

Asuhain-san, still in Aso-senpai's arms, began shaking. "At first, I didn't know what that word meant, but when I looked it up in a dictionary, I was so shocked. I had no idea that boys had such low intelligence. They're like parrots, just repeating the same things over and over and over again! How are you supposed to talk to organisms like that?! They should be locked away in cages like animals at the zoo!" Asuhain's small fists shook as whatever she'd been holding inside gushed out. "But then for some reason, as the years passed, girls started dating them! What's so good about romance?! What compels

them to want to be with those stupid parrots?! They're better off having *real* parrots as pets! Right?!"

Her menacing look made me back away a little, but Aso-senpai smiled, continuing to hold her. "That's what you say, but these boobs of yours are such cutie-pies! They're as rare as a unicorn! They push your stock way up!"

I have no clue what she's talking about, so for now, I think it's best if I just force a smile.

The Student Council Members of Rakuro High School

"Well, hello, everyone." The president, Suzuri Kurenai, entered the room calmly, a contrast to the commotion that Aso-senpai and Asuhain-san were causing.

President Kurenai, with her naturally commanding presence, was the same small-framed girl I remembered. Right behind her, as always, as though he were trying to hide in her shadow, was a guy with unfashionable glasses, Joji Haba-senpai. He was *also* the same as I remembered him.

"Heya, Suzurin! You too, Joe-kun! I've gone ahead and started flirtin' with the froshies!"

"I'm always impressed by how quickly you can warm up to people, Aisa."

"Well, of course. Somebody has to be the nice one. You're too uptight, Suzurin. Right, Joe?"

Haba-senpai walked towards the meeting table and put his bag down without saying a word.

Aso-senpai frowned and began pouting, like a cute child. "Why are you so scared of me?"

Still, Haba-senpai said nothing.

"Hmph. Why don't you look inward?"

"How long are you gonna hold *that* against me, Suzurin?"

"I'm doing no such thing. I'm simply keeping in mind how a certain person spoke in the third-person for so long."

"Says the girl who talks like a boy!"

I'd never seen anyone speak this frankly to her before. I felt like I was getting a look into their experiences over the past year here in this room. Right now, I felt like an outsider and had no clue what they were talking about. But...maybe in a year, I'd have my own kinds of conversations with them like the one they were having right now. It felt weird thinking about it like that.

"U-Um!" While I stood there in a daze, Asuhain-san escaped Aso-senpai's embrace and nervously moved to stand in front of President Kurenai. "M-My name is Asuhain. I was recruited to the student

council on Aso-senpai's recommendation. I may be inexperienced, but I look forward to working with you!"

"Likewise, Asuhain-kun." In the next moment, she suddenly clasped Asuhain-san's hands in her own and stared right into her eyes, a smile on her face, which was so beautiful that Asuhain-san fell silent and blushed. "I'm inexperienced as well, so if you ever see me making an error, I'd like you very much to correct me. Of course, I will do the same for you, and pull out all the stops to help."

"U-Uh... O-Okay." Asuhain-san had gone stiff and could only mechanically nod her head.

"Ugh, you temptress," Aso-senpai muttered in annoyance, seeing this situation unfold in front of her.

Though Asuhain-san had been so confrontational with me, it seemed that deep down, she was just like me and had a deep respect for President Kurenai.



When she let go of Asuhain-san's hands, she looked at me. "My thanks to you as well, Yume-kun. I'm grateful you accepted my invitation."

"No need to thank me. I'm doing this because I want to. I look forward to working with you."

I could see Asuhain-san enviously glaring at me from President Kurenai's blind spot after I flawlessly completed my introduction. "Wh-Why are you calling Irido-san by her first name?" she asked.

"There was another member on the cultural festival committee who shared her last name. Would you prefer that I call you by your first name as well, Ran-kun?"

Asuhain-san yelped. "Th-Th-Thank you very much!" She bowed deeply.

Seeing this, President Kurenai smiled and nodded before heading to the table where Haba-senpai was already sitting.

"Well, take your seats. We're all here," she said, taking the chair at the head of the table.

Following her, the rest of us sat at the table. In compliance with school rules, there were five members of the student council. Three of us were second-years: the president, Suzuri Kurenai; the vice president, Aisa Aso; and the treasurer, Joji Haba. The remaining two were first-years: the general affairs officer, Ran Asuhain, and the secretary, me.

President Kurenai folded her arms with composure. "From today onwards, we are the members of Rakuro High School's student council."

A Former Member Who's Still Around for Some Reason

We heard a yawn, but it wasn't from anyone at the table. A doorknob clicked as it turned, but it wasn't from the entrance. Out the door came a large guy. *H-He's huge*. This time, I wasn't talking about chest size but physical height. He was seriously tall. He had to have been over 180 centimeters, if not 190. His toned body made me wonder if he played sports, but his long hair made me think twice about that.

He wore our school uniform, so he was definitely a student, but he looked older than that. Judging by the loosened blue tie he had on, though, he was a third-year. I had no memory of ever seeing him before in my life, but for some reason, he felt familiar. All our eyes fell on him as he yawned, his eyes tearing up a little, but the first one to react was Aso-senpai.

"Huh? Senpai? What are you doing here?!"

“Uh... Oh, Aso? I was takin’ a nap. Pulled an all-nighter watchin’ a stream.”

“President...” President Kurenai’s voice was filled with annoyance. *Did she say “President”?* “You resigned from your position. Could you please refrain from using the documents room as your napping quarters?”

“Don’t be like that, Kurenai. This is just my way of watching over the new generation.”

“Translation: you’re bored now that you’ve been accepted to college via recommendation.”

“One might say that,” he said, grinning.

President Kurenai sighed and turned to me and Asuhain-san, who were completely out of the loop. “I’ll introduce you. This is Tohdo Hoshibe, the previous president. You may have seen him at the school assembly or another school gathering.”

Oh... Right. I remember seeing him at the school assembly and the commencement ceremony. He gave the welcome speech as the representative for the returning students.

After Asuhain-san and I greeted him, Hoshibe-senpai stuck his hands in his pockets and looked down at us. “Hm?” He tilted his head. “Both of the new members really are girls. This has gotta be rough for you, huh, Haba?” he said, putting one of his large hands on Haba-senpai’s shoulder.

“Not really...” he said in a reserved voice.

Hoshibe-senpai ignored Haba-senpai’s words and grinned. “I guess I’ll keep poppin’ in every now and then. I feel bad for Haba since he’s the only guy here. Phew, what a great idea.”

“Again—you’re just bored because you don’t have to worry about college,” President Kurenai said.

“One might say that.”

President Kurenai looked less than pleased, but on the flip side, Aso-senpai shot to her feet, a teasing grin on her face. She moved close to Hoshibe-senpai’s huge body and made him look down at her.

“Aw, you say that, but really, you just wanna meet your dear Aisa-chan, don’t you?” she said.

“Nope. Just no.”

“Aw, no need to be so embarrassed. You’re such a cutie-pie, senpai!”

“God, you’re such a pain in the ass, as always!”

In response, she just happily smiled. She was tall for a girl, but she seemed like a child in comparison to Hoshibe-senpai. He shoved her off of him and headed to the visitor’s couch as if to flee from her.

“Anyway, I’m gonna take a nap. Do your thing, Kurenai.”

“Aw, why you gotta run away, senpai?” Aso-senpai continued in

her cutesy, sweet tone of voice towards Hoshibe-senpai.

“Aisa,” President Kurenai said in a soft, but sharp voice. “I understand how happy you must feel to have been reunited with your beloved Hoshibe-senpai, but you need to prioritize properly welcoming our newcomers first.”

“H-Huh?! B-Beloved? Don’t say things in a way that can be misunderstood, Suzurin! Our underclassmen are right there!”

President Kurenai shrugged while Aso-senpai deeply frowned and returned to her seat. I glanced across the table from me at Asuhain-san, who was wearing a stiff expression of dissatisfaction, kind of like a pouting kid. *I see...* I began to understand that no matter where we were—at a prep school or in the student council room—high school students weren’t too different from one another. Asuhain-san may have disapproved of this lax atmosphere of the student council, but I was growing fond of this new place.

My First Time with Isana Higashira

Mizuto Irido

Unlike Yume, who had started her first day as a member of the student council, I was up to my usual activities—going to the library and hanging out with Isana Higashira. In fact, recently, she’d been hanging out with me outside of our usual after-school get-togethers in the library. She’d even begun coming to my classroom during lunch breaks.

Without raising her eyes from the light novel she was reading, she said, “By the way, Mizuto-kun, what do you have in mind?”

“Huh?” *For what?*

Isana began stretching and curling her sockless toes that she’d brought up onto the air conditioning unit by the windowsill. “Surely, you remember the abandonment role-play we engaged in on the night of the cultural festival. You left me by my lonesome, and promised that you’d ‘make it up to me.’”

“Oh, right... I guess I did say something random like that.”

“What do you mean, ‘*random*’?! I’ve been seriously looking forward to it!”

To be honest, whether I promised that or not, I still wanted to do something for Isana as thanks for all the help she’d given me that day. “Well, what do you want? I’ll do just about anything, so long as it’s within my power.”

“Huh? You said ‘*anything*,’ correct? I’m not mishearing you, am I?”

As soon as I saw how quickly she’d latched on to what I’d said, I realized how grave an error I’d made. I leaned back in an attempt to

run away from Isana, who'd promptly begun leaning towards me.

"A-A-Anything?!" She audibly licked her lips. "Y-You said 'anything,' did you not?!"

"Oh god! Creep! Creep! Creep alert! Calm the hell down, you creepy otaku! I *said*, 'as long as it's within my power.'"

"O-Oh, it most certainly is... Heh heh... Eheh heh heh... All that I require is for you to keep a slightly open mind. Eheh heh heh! Just a little, okay?"

She's lucky I owe her, or else I'd have the police on the line right now. I grabbed Isana by the shoulders and peeled her off of me. "So what do you want? I'll hear you out."

"Ehe. W-Well, there's... Eheh heh. There's somewhere I've wanted to go with you for quite some time."

"Uh-huh..."

"It's a facility equipped with private, soundproofed rooms that a guy and a girl can rest in for an hourly fee!"

"Knock it off." *Is she just a ball of lust?*

But just as I thought that and prepared to exercise my right to self-defense, Isana Higashira's nostrils flared, and she said the unexpected: "A manga café! Would you go with me?"

I had no words. *Oh. That's what you meant?*

Though I was familiar with the sign of this building, I'd never been inside. I'd never had a reason to. If I wanted to read a book, I'd buy it. If I didn't have the money, I'd just go to the library and borrow it. I barely read manga in the first place. The very concept of manga cafés didn't appeal to me whatsoever.

But according to Isana Higashira, who wanted to go there, "Manga tend to take up more space than light novels, since there are typically more volumes. In general, purchasing manga is much less economical than purchasing light novels. Wouldn't you agree? After all, it takes approximately three hours to read a light novel as opposed to the one hour that it takes to read a volume of manga."

"I've never thought about books in terms of bang for your buck, but I guess I see what you mean in terms of time. If you make a light novel into manga, it usually turns into three or four volumes."

"And you'd want to read them all at once, wouldn't you? But that would cost a hefty sum of money." *And that's where the manga café comes in, huh? After all, libraries don't typically carry manga.*

Isana giggled. "Well, I must admit, I simply enjoy the thought of sharing a two-person room at the café with you."

"Yeah, well, it might've stayed *just* a thought if it wasn't for me owing you."

"Indeed. However, I'm sure you and Yume-san will have many

chances to go in the future.”

“Not a chance.”

“Why not?”

“She’d one hundred percent freak the hell out.” *No matter how innocent she looked, her mind was totally in the gutter.*

“Hnnngh.”

“What now?”

“Have I ever informed you that I’m quite the fan of male tsunderes?”

“What are you even talking about?”

“Hnnnnngh!”

She was beginning to get on my nerves, so I gave her a quick poke before entering the manga café on the second floor of the building. Apparently she’d already made a reservation through their website, but she was too shy to talk to the person at reception. With Isana hiding behind me, I checked us in and then we made our way to the two-person room.

“Whoa!” Along the way, Isana marveled at the line of computers with open seats and the tall bookcases that went all the way to the ceiling, packed with manga. “Soft serve! It’s an all-you-can-eat soft serve station, Mizuto-kun!”

“Yeah, looks like it. But isn’t it hard to eat while reading manga?”

“I have a separate stomach for ice cream!”

“What does that have to do with anything? Whatever. Let’s put our stuff down first.”

Isana had reserved us a private two-person room for three hours. It was a very affordable price for high schoolers as long as they split the cost. The floor of the room was pretty much composed purely of what looked to be flat, soft cushions. *I think these are regular mats.* Isana entered first and plopped down.

“Ooh!”

I shut the door behind us and watched as Isana looked around the relatively cramped room. “I like this. It’s as if we’ve shut out the world.”

“That’s an interesting way of putting it.” True enough, it felt as if we’d shut out any exterior stimulation and information. *I like it.* There was a sense of freedom that I just didn’t get from more spacious areas. It might’ve been perfect for our personalities.

“Mizuto-kun, please remove my socks.”

“Don’t you need to find a manga to read first?”

“Oh, fair point.”

I put my stuff down and opened the door again to leave. As soon as I did, Isana crawled out, got up, and headed to the area with the bookshelves.

“All this manga is fair game?” I asked.

“It’s quite exhilarating, is it not?”

Yeah, I have to admit...it’s pretty fun to see all these bookcases completely stuffed. I picked out a few titles and began flipping through them while Isana began to amass a huge pile of books, showing no signs of stopping.

“Oh, no! Everything past the fourth volume is missing! Who is selfishly holding on to them?!”

“Are you really one to talk?” I asked, eyeing the tower of manga in her arms. She must’ve had about twenty or so volumes. *I don’t believe it. You’re definitely not finishing all those in three hours.*

We returned to our room after I grabbed about half the number of manga she had. For the record, she’d given up on getting soft serve because her hands were full. She piled up the manga on the computer desk, and put her arms to either side of her.

“All right. Now then...” she began, sticking out her feet to me. It was obvious what she wanted, so I proceeded to remove her socks for her. “It almost feels like we’re in your room, Mizuto-kun.”

“Really sucks that we paid money for such a similar experience, then.”

“Oh, but there is a difference. We’re both wearing our school uniforms!”

“Ah, so that’s why.”

“Huh?” Isana tilted her head.

I caught a glimpse of a light blue fabric in between her thighs.

“Are you forgetting you’re wearing a skirt?”

“I-I’m *showing* them to you.”

“That’s not much better.”

Isana groaned embarrassedly before shifting position, closing her legs and sitting on her knees. Then, she proceeded to look away from me. “Truth be told, Mizuto-kun...”

“Yeah?”

“As I got used to going to your house every day over summer break...I sort of lost something.”

“Lost what?”

“My sense of shame.” As soon as she said that, she stopped trying to hold her skirt down and to my dismay returned to sitting cross-legged. “I might be at a point where I’m not fazed whatsoever by you seeing my undergarments.”

“Well, find it! Find your sense of shame at once!”

Isana groaned, dissatisfied. “But if you won’t ever feel any dirty feelings towards me, what does it matter?”

I never said I wouldn’t. That’s the problem.

Mutual Admiration and Imitation

Yume Irido

“Well, this seems like a good stopping point.”

We’d gone through a basic explanation of our work expectations, and with that, our first day as student council members ended. Perhaps sensing his chance, the former president, Hoshibe-senpai, got up from the couch and let out a yawn.

“Oh, all done? Let’s get going then. The welcome party awaits.”

President Kurenai shot him a tired look. “Don’t tell me this is why you went out of your way to take a nap here.”

“Whoa. Don’t tell me you weren’t planning on inviting me. You owe me as your upperclassman, don’t you?”

“Yikes, so clingy! You’re gonna make me become disillusioned with you, senpai,” Aso-senpai said teasingly.

Hoshibe-senpai laughed loudly in response. *I don’t really know what his deal is, but maybe he’s the mood maker.* His leadership style was different from President Kurenai’s, who commanded others with her charisma.

“Well, disregarding whether we include an ex-member in our festivities, I’ve already picked out a venue. I’d be very happy if the first-years joined as well.”

“Oh, yes. Of course,” I said.

“I will!” Asuhain-san said enthusiastically.

President Kurenai smiled and nodded at our responses. Not too long after, the six of us were walking out of the school, following her towards the town. Asuhain-san and I followed behind her. Behind us, Aso-senpai seemed to be trying to bother Hoshibe-senpai. And then, Haba-senpai trailed us in the back, as if he’d become our shadow.

“So, how was your first day on the job?” President Kurenai asked, turning to me and Asuhain-san.

“Well, it’s hard to say because we haven’t done any real work quite yet, but...” I started. “It was nerve-racking. I’m not really good around people.”

“You could’ve fooled me. You must be skilled at compensating for your flaws. I never got the feeling even a little bit that you’re shy.”

Oh, that makes me so happy. She’d praised the exact thing I wanted to be recognized for. *Is this the power of a natural-born leader?*

“What about you, Ran-kun?”

“U-Uh, w-well, um...” Asuhain-san’s small body began to tremble. “I...I thought it was much more relaxing than I expected.” Even after essentially bugging out, she was still able to express her true feelings. “Oh!” Seemingly realizing this, she quickly covered her mouth and

groaned a little out of embarrassment.

President Kurenai lightly chuckled. "I'm not surprised you feel that way. Those were my precise thoughts last year as well."

"Huh? Really?"

"I'd believed that the student council was a much more serious and rigid organization, but the former president had the same devil-may-care attitude as he does now. I initially believed that it was up to me to tighten the ship." She shot a glance behind her towards Hoshibe-senpai, who was mimicking someone. Probably a streamer, if I had to guess.

"That's nothing like them! Apologize to them! They're Aisa's favorite!" Aso-senpai raged at him.

She really does speak in the third person. At her age?

"I'm sure you're carrying the same thoughts as I used to. Am I wrong, Ran-kun?"

"U-Uh, well..."

The way that her voice faltered and how she averted her gaze made it clear that President Kurenai's guess was right on the money.

"Very good," she said firmly, making Asuhain-san look back up. "I've no intention of forcing you to conform to my vision. If anything, having such a well-put-together first-year like you will help keep the second-years honest. You should be true to yourself."

"O-Okay!" Asuhain-san tensed up, obviously taking her words to heart.

The way Asuhain-san revered her, though, went beyond simple respect for an upperclassman. *Does she see President Kurenai as some kind of god?*

Asuhain-san was finally able to exhale and loosen up when President Kurenai turned forward again.

"Hey, Asuhain-san?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes?" She responded in her usual tone of animosity while looking up at me. Despite her glare, her face was too cute to scare me.

"Where did you meet President Kurenai? As for me, I met her when we worked on the festival committee together."

I couldn't remember seeing Asuhain-san on the committee. She must've met the president somewhere else if she looked up to her this much, though. *But where, I wonder?*

"Our meeting wasn't anything too special..." Asuhain-san said dejectedly, as if she were mocking herself. "I was being bothered by a guy around when school started. Usually they'd take a hint and go away, but this time was different."

Ah, she was getting hit on. Akatsuki-san had mentioned before that she didn't get hit on a lot because her small stature made others think she was in middle school. Even though Asuhain-san was about the

same height, her large breasts apparently didn't give her the same young image.

"I was saved from that dire situation by Kurenai-senpai, who happened to be passing by. I remember her dazzling, cool figure like it was yesterday."

I mentally nodded along. The two girls weren't too different in terms of height. For some reason, though, President Kurenai felt taller than her actual physical height. I was sure this was due in part to how she feared no one and was so sure of herself.

"And that's when I decided I wanted to be on the student council too. I've always had good test scores, so I figured that as long as I kept working hard, I'd get invited. All I had to do was keep working hard, but..." I found myself awkwardly chuckling as she glared at me. Soon enough, she exhaled and continued. "To be honest, I meant to introduce myself with more grace, but I freaked out. How, um... How are you able to speak with her so normally, Irido-san? Is it just something you get used to over time?"

"Well... Truth be told, at first, I was stiff as a board." *I guess it all changed during that one conversation.* I suddenly remembered the guy in the back who was pretty much blending into the background. "She might seem like she's on a different level from us, but...she's actually much more normal than you'd think."

"Normal"? *Kurenai-senpai?*"

"Yep. I'm sure you'll find that out yourself too one day."

Asuhain-san narrowed her eyes and furrowed her brow. "Why does it feel like you're trying to assert your dominance?"

"Huh?! W-Wait, no. That wasn't my intention at all!"

But also...I highly doubt she's capable of having conversations about love. It feels like it'd trigger her. How will she react if she finds out that President Kurenai has a thing for Haba-senpai? I hope everything will be okay...

The President's Side Job

The venue for our welcome party ended up being a café with a small sign in a quiet alley. I couldn't tell if she'd reserved the entire store for us or if it just didn't have any customers to begin with, but either way, we were the only ones inside. We nervously walked past the tables to our seats. Ultimately, Asuhain-san and I ended up sitting right next to each other.

After we were seated, President Kurenai called out to us. "What would you all like to drink?" We all said our various orders, and she nodded. "All right then. I'll get things ready. Be right back."

Get what things ready? But my question was answered as she

disappeared into the staff room.

“Suzurin works here part-time,” Aso-senpai, who was sitting next to Hoshibe-senpai, said.

I was surprised. “She...has a job *and* is on the student council?”

“Yep! It’s her way of learning more about the ‘real world.’ How serious is she, right?”

Wow... Her stamina is insane. And she’s always number one on exams. She is simply built different.

“Maybe I should work a part-time job too...” Asuhain-san mumbled, curiously looking around the store.

Hearing her say that made me feel like I needed to get off my butt and do something too.

Though Asuhain-san had commented in a low voice, Hoshibe-senpai had still heard her. “I wouldn’t recommend tryin’ to copy her. She’s a special breed of person with monster stats to spare.”

“You’re saying I can’t be like Kurenai-senpai?” Asuhain-san asked, unsatisfied.

“At the very least, you couldn’t do it without wrecking your body in the process. If you’re still okay with that, then the most important thing is taking it step by step. If you try to go for everything at once, you’re gonna end up with nothing,” Hoshibe-senpai remarked as he played on his phone.

“Thanks for the warning...”

“Oh hell yeah, an SR.”

His advice had been spot-on, but it felt weird that it had come while he was playing a game. Even Asuhain-san was giving him a distrusting look.

In the meantime, the door to the staff room opened. “Apologies for the wait,” said Kurenai-senpai, now clad in a waitress’s uniform, which included a knee-length skirt and a white apron. It gave off a different vibe than her usual attire, but it was a perfect fit for her small, feminine figure.

I couldn’t help but clap in awe. “It looks really good on you, President Kurenai.”

“Thank you. Apparently, it’s a hit among the regulars too.”

She seemed strangely proud. It was cute in a childish way. *Didn’t she wear a military-esque lolita-style costume to the presentation as well? She was really cute then too.*

“Senpai...”

“Hm?”

“Do you like cosplay?”

President Kurenai flashed a dauntless smile in response. “Enjoying fashion is a girl’s birthright. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Well... Yes, I guess so.”

So, the answer is yes, she likes cosplay.

President Kurenai brought over our drinks on a tray. “We have all kinds of refreshments, so please feel free to order whatever you’d like. It’s all on me.”

“Thank you!” Asuhain-san exclaimed.

President Kurenai nodded and then moved to the table next to ours. *Hm? Why?* But I soon noticed that Haba-senpai was sitting there by himself. *When did he get here?*

Haba-senpai’s booth could seat four people, but she went out of her way to plop herself down right next to him. He leaned away in an attempt to avoid her, but she used that opportunity to scoot even closer.

“H-Hey, Asuhain-san?” I couldn’t help but call out to her as she tried to lean past me out of the booth to peek at what was going on at their table. But my voice did nothing to deter her. She looked at the two of them with confusion.

“Are those two...close?”

She didn’t mince words. *Close? Well, if you consider her trying to seduce him in an empty classroom “close,” then, yeah.* But I wasn’t about to say that to Asuhain-san. She not only had a hatred for guys, but also looked up a great deal to President Kurenai. I was at a loss. *Should I skirt the issue? Or maybe I should just get it over with?*

“Well, they’ve been in the same class for all of high school,” Aso-senpai said as she sipped her strawberry au lait in the midst of my thoughts. “Suzurin was the one who discovered Joe-kun’s abilities and dragged him onto the student council. Despite that, he’s remained the same presenceless guy from when he joined, so she looks out for him.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is.”

Aso-senpai covertly winked at me. *You’re a lifesaver! Also, you’re really good at winking!*

Hoshibe-senpai, not looking up from his phone, began talking. “That’s putting it lightly. I mean, it’s obvious that she has a thing for — Oof!”

“Oops, senpai! I accidentally hit you with my elbow!”

“*Accidentally?! That was definitely on purpose!*” he snapped back at Aso-senpai.

“It’s your fault for having such a big body. Blame your huge hitbox.”

While Aso-senpai continued to get shots in on Hoshibe-senpai’s sides with her elbow, Asuhain-san’s eyes remained fixed with suspicion on the back of Haba-senpai’s head.

That Which Shines at the End of Oneself

The sound of pages being turned filled the room. Next to me, Isana Higashira was hugging her knees while staring intently at the manga she was reading. It went without saying that she wasn't even trying to make sure her skirt was covering anything. If I'd been sitting in front of her, I would've seen her panties whether I wanted to or not, which is why I had opted to sit next to her instead. After all, there wasn't much else I could do. Even if I warned her, she wouldn't change a thing.

Out of the huge collection of manga volumes that Isana had brought into the room, I'd picked out a few older series that had fewer volumes. Since people were starting to call these classics, they were hard to find in bookstores. Given that, I thought I should take advantage of the situation, or else I might never get another chance to read them. Classics that survived the test of time came this far because they were interesting and had elements that are believed to have influenced later works, regardless of genre.

After I finished reading, I took the volumes all back to their respective shelves, understanding that it was very poor manners to keep volumes to yourself for extended periods of time. On the way back, I grabbed drinks, and when I returned to the room, I saw Isana with her tablet on her lap.

"What're you doing?" I asked, putting a straw into the apple juice I'd gotten for her.

I moved it close to her mouth so she could drink it. After gulping down a few sips without looking away from her tablet, she sighed. "Oh, nothing, really. There was a particularly nice scene..."

"Oh yeah?"

In her right hand was a stylus and in her left hand a manga volume. A quick look told me that Isana was sketching out a certain panel from the manga.

"Aren't manga artists amazing? They can draw anything from all sorts of perspectives. I wonder how their brains work," she mused.

"I'd say you're pretty amazing yourself. Not just anyone starts sketching at the drop of a hat. You do that often?"

"I suppose from a young age I've entertained myself by sketching illustrations from light novels. However, in more recent years, I've felt the desire to actually improve my skills."

"Why the sudden change of heart?"

"Because you praised me." *Me?* "You might have complimented my sketch without thinking too much about it, but...secretly, it made me extremely happy, especially since it was my own originally designed composition. Before I knew it, I found your praise repeating

itself in my head over and over again. So I've begun thinking that maybe I could try putting in a little more effort. As simple a reason as it is, that's how I feel at the moment." Isana continued drawing, a smile forming. "Also, I've found that it's incredibly fun to draw!"

I honestly don't remember complimenting her like that. So she's probably right about me saying it without thinking too much. But that was enough to light a fire inside her. I'd always known that she had talent, but seeing it in action like this just confirmed it for me. I was honestly surprised.

Though I was genuinely astonished, I was also genuinely happy for her...and genuinely jealous. Isana had found something that was uniquely hers. It was the opposite of how she used to be. She was so blinding in comparison that I almost recoiled.

I have no ideals, no goal I want to achieve. Even so, Isana said it was okay for me to fall in love, but there was no chance that someone empty like me would be able to change. But...if I could contribute to her brilliance this much, then maybe there was at least a little bit of meaning to me being here. I sat next to her as she single-mindedly continued to draw and brushed against her shoulder.

"Let me know if you ever want to be praised again."

"Oh no, it will have the opposite effect if you praise me just for the sake of doing so."

"What a pain in the ass."

The Onus of Restraint Is on Us

"A-Ah... Haah..."

Huh? I turned around, hearing a voice or something. *Am I just hearing things? I could've sworn I heard a kinda labored voice.*

"D-Don't— Ah!"

"Hyah!" Isana jumped, completely breaking from her concentrated state.

We looked at each other and naturally began whispering.

"Uh... Did you hear that?"

"Indeed. I believe it's what you suspect!"

There was probably no need to go out of our way to confirm what was going on. We most likely had the right idea regarding the location and cause of the voice. We both slowly turned behind us.

"A-Ah! N-Not there..."

Behind us was a wall. The source of the voice lay on the other side, in a different two-person room. If we listened hard enough, we could hear rustling. It was hard to come up with a different interpretation of what was going on over there than what we were currently thinking of.

“G-Goodness! A-Are they—” Isana stammered.

“H-Hey, calm down.”

“They are totally *doing* it, aren’t they? They’re having interco—”

“I told you to calm down!”

“Mmff!” Isana struggled as I frantically covered her mouth with my hand.

“Okay, calm down and think. Sure, there are rumors about that kind of thing happening at manga cafés, but what are the odds of us *actually* happening on that exact situation? I bet the sound’s just coming from a porno or something.”

“T-True... Yes, you’re probably...”

“Nnn! Ah... Haa...”

“However, Mizuto-kun... Don’t you think that woman’s moaning sounds a little too real to be coming from speakers?”

How should I know?! Actually, why would you know?! Isana slowly pulled her mouth away from my hand in the midst of the muffled voices and looked at me nervously, her cheeks flushed.

“U-Uh... Mizuto-kun...”

“Oh.” I hadn’t realized how close our bodies had gotten.

I’d grabbed her by the shoulders without even thinking, and my knee was close to going in between her legs. I was pretty sure that even the tiniest bit of force from me would’ve easily pushed her to the ground. There was also the fact that Isana was shrinking her shoulders while nervously looking up at me—that only served to make the weird atmosphere around us worse. The sounds coming from the room next door were forcing my mind into a certain place, making me even more aware of Isana’s chest, which was rising and falling.

“Your line of sight...” Isana whispered, a little embarrassed.

“When you’re this close, even I can tell, Mizuto-kun...”

“Uh... Right. Sorry...”

“This isn’t something you should do to Yume-san.” Isana began toying with her bangs. “However...it is permissible with me.”

Sometimes I got the feeling that she aimed for these kinds of situations. Despite saying that she had no intentions of engaging in these kinds of activities with me anymore, I couldn’t help but think that she was actually waiting for her chance to seduce me. The worst part, though, was that she was a natural seductress, so it was hard to deal with.

I was just like everyone else. The only thing different about me was that I didn’t let it show on my face. Otherwise, I was a normal guy. Even if I’d categorized Isana as my friend, I would get hit with pangs of desire, and there was nothing I could do about it. But I knew how she was, so I took it upon myself to be the responsible one and restrain myself.

“Wah!”

I pulled Isana’s head against my chest and ruffled her hair. *Look! She’s no different than a big dog. She’s like a pet, and I am not the type to lust after pets. She’s a pet. A pet...*

“M-Mizuto-kun? I-I can’t breathe!” Isana cried, flailing around.

In the next moment, there was a loud bang as her leg came into contact with the desk, making the tower of manga begin to wobble.

“Ah—” I reflexively reached out to stop it from falling, but as I tried to use my other hand to support myself, it instead found a nearby...familiar object.

“Nnah!”

This time, I heard a moan, not from the other side of the wall, but from right by me. The manga tower came falling down and I realized that my hand had found its way onto something extremely soft. What I’d grabbed was so big that it didn’t fit into my hand. My fingers sank into it as if it was a memory foam pillow, but if I pushed, I could feel it pushing back on me. But also, I felt hard wire outlining the soft object.

Isana’s face was now a deep red, and her breaths were coming in short gasps. Her hands were behind her, underneath the fallen volumes of manga, supporting her body. She was not doing anything about my hand. She was accepting it—accepting the hand that was grabbing her breast.

“Mizuto...kun...”

She showed no signs of disdain or of wanting me to back off. Instead, she looked at me with moist eyes. The sounds from next door began dubbing over Isana, preventing me from distinguishing reality from fantasy. I was starting to get scared.

I’d touched her. Up until now, I’d been able to avoid touching her directly with my hand, but now... Now I knew what it felt like. I also had proof that even if I touched her breasts, she wouldn’t hate it. I cautiously removed my hand from her chest. Isana also slowly fixed her disheveled skirt and turned away, facing the ground.

After a little bit, she spoke in a soft voice. “Mizuto-kun...did you do that on purpose? I’ve been fairly considerate since I’m cognizant of your affection for Yume-san. I’ve truly been holding myself back! However, if you approach me with such seductive methods, you will make any rational thinking fly out the window!” *You were being considerate up until now? Really? Wow, I’d hate to see how you’d act unrestrained.* Isana turned back towards me on all fours and approached. “If I’m unable to restrain myself any further...I’ll have you take responsibility.”

“Wh-What do you mean by that?”

“I would have you commit adultery and plunge into the pleasures

of immorality with me.” I felt a little relieved. If she was joking with me like this, then I felt assured that things wouldn’t go south. “I’d ask that you become part of my reference material when I draw dirty manga.”

“That sounds like something you’d *actually* ask me, so no.”

“Anyway!” she interrupted. “Please refrain from any actions that I could misconstrue!”

That’s my line. But I guess this one is kind of on me. I could’ve been more in control. I had no choice but to agree with her here. But also, did she really misconstrue me accidentally touching her from falling? Wasn’t that kinda worrying in and of itself?

Isana exhaled. “At any rate, the root cause of this is the ill-mannered lechers next door who— Huh?”

“What?”

Isana suddenly looked at the wall with a puzzled look on her face. It didn’t take me long to realize what she was so confused about.

“I don’t think I hear them anymore.”

Isana was right. I wasn’t sure when it had happened, but it was dead silent over there now. Had they realized we’d heard them? But there was no way they could stop making sound altogether and make it seem like they weren’t there. Isana and I looked at each other—the same idea in mind. We both stealthily left our room and secretly peeked next door, but no one was there. In fact, there wasn’t so much as a trace of people being there recently.

“Hey...Mizuto-kun? Have you heard about this before?”

“About what?”

“Apparently, ghosts flee when they hear people discussing lewd topics.”

“And why exactly are you bringing this up right now?” *What does this have to do with anything?*

Isana began trembling with a blank look on her face. “Would you please...escort me home today?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Also, please accompany me to the manga café next time I visit.”

Wow, she’s brave. Most people wouldn’t want to ever come again.

The Person I Like Lives with Me

Yume Irido

By the time the sun had begun to set and the sky had darkened, the welcome party had ended.

“Well then, the real work begins tomorrow,” President Kurenai said. “I’ll be counting on all of you.”

“I’ll do my best!” Asuhain-san said nervously.

“I look forward to working with all of you,” I said.

Everyone but me broke off into small groups and headed home. As I walked by myself, I reminisced about the people I’d met today. Asuhain-san viewed me as a rival. Due to her straitlacedness and past experiences, she was very anti-romance. She’d probably go crazy if she knew about President Kurenai’s situation or mine.

Aso-senpai didn’t seem all that reliable, and she was pretty flirty with guys. If I was being honest, I didn’t want her around Mizuto at all. But then again, maybe she was only like that with Hoshibe-senpai.

Speaking of whom, the former president of the student council seemed rather lazy, but I’d caught a glimpse of his wisdom through his words today. He’d said he’d come today because he was bored, but I wasn’t sure if that was the whole truth.

For someone like me who’d never even joined a club before, this was my first time having upperclassmen mentors and a same-age colleague. If this were me in middle school, I would’ve been fretting over if I could do a good job and get along with them, but not now. I was different now. I felt like the world had become more interesting. It was as if I was looking forward to things and was more sure of myself. I was filled with that excitement and—

“Ah.”

My thoughts were interrupted as I caught sight of a familiar figure. As the year got deeper into fall, the days had become shorter. It was rare for him to be out walking this late. The sun had already set. He must’ve gone out with Higashira-san somewhere. It didn’t seem like he’d noticed me yet, which gave me an idea for a prank. A smile crept across my face as I snuck up behind him.

“Wah!”

“Dowaoh!” Mizuto made an incomprehensible noise and jumped away as if he’d been flung back.

Wow, what a reaction. I’m the one doing the scaring, but he’s making me freeze up. “Y-You scared me. I didn’t expect you to be that surprised,” I said.

“O-Oh. It’s you...” he said, glancing at my face before looking away with embarrassment.

Aw, you’re so cute when you’re embarrassed. He reminded me of how romantic conquests in visual novels would frequently rub their necks for no reason.

“Due to various reasons, I ended up walking Isana home... You just getting back from the student council?”

“Yeah. We had a welcome party in the café that President Kurenai works part-time at.”

“She’s working a job? That’s hard to imagine.”

He's more chatty than usual. Is he trying to play off how scared he was? "So...what sort of 'various reasons'?" I took a step forward, closing the distance between us, and asked him, looking right into his eyes.

He recoiled a little. "Just some stupid ones."

"Like what? Actually, before that, what did you guys do together?"

The questions came out of me so naturally. I wasn't jealous, honestly. Him hanging out with her was old news. I was genuinely curious about what he did while I was with the student council members. It was completely natural and reasonable that I wanted to hear him talk about the things I didn't know about him. But also, I wanted to tell him all about what had happened today, the people I'd met, my new place, and the new things I'd learned. I wanted him to know about the things he didn't know about me.

We'd talk, listen, and share. I wanted to look back on this day, which should've been commemorated, with him. Fortunately, we had time. After all, we were—

"Fine, I'll tell you. We're heading to the same place, anyway."

It's really inconvenient for the person you like to live with you, but it's very blissful. After all, I never had to say "good-bye." I never had to say "see you tomorrow." I never had to see him walk in the opposite direction. Even if we weren't together when the sun rose, we were together when it set, and could talk about the events of the day. We could take our time getting to know the parts of each other that we didn't know—solving each other's mysteries one by one.

"So, I experienced a two-person room in a manga café with Isana today..."

Sorry, what? The jealousy I was feeling was also a luxury I could only experience because we lived under the same roof. *Living together is so much better than sharing some stupid room in a manga café anyway!*

I Want to Make You Blush

The Ex-Girlfriend Wants to Be a Femme Fatale

Yume Irido

I, Yume Irido, am in love with Mizuto Irido. That's not exactly new; my feelings date back to when I first met him two years ago. Though some things have changed since then, namely that I've matured, I dated and broke up with Mizuto, and even became his stepsibling. Each day we lived alongside each other, hurling insults left and right. As such, it became difficult for me to tell him how I felt. Can you blame me?! Let's be real—if I stopped insulting him and started fawning all over him, it would not only be super weird, it'd be *humiliating*!

Preferably, I wanted to steal his heart without being too obvious. I wanted him to fall hard for me—harder than when we were in middle school! I wanted him to fall for me, and if possible, I wanted him to ask me out.

I wasn't wimping out; this was only fair. After all, I'd asked him out back in middle school. Thus, I had but one goal: I needed to become someone who made it impossible to tell how they really felt about you—someone who'd make you feel hot and bothered regardless of how you usually felt about them. I needed to become a femme fatale! Fortunately, I wasn't short of opportunities to play this part. I just needed to take a stab whenever I saw a chance to.

"M-Mizuto!" After finding him sitting on the couch in the living room, I steeled my will and pounced on him—that is to say, I leaned onto his shoulders from behind.

Light physical contact! It's a deadly move that forces guys to take interest in you...or at least that's what Akatsuki-san said. In addition, I looked at Mizuto's face from the side.

"Wh-What...are you up to?" I asked. *I'm invading your personal space! Guys fall hard for touchy-feely girls...is also something that Akatsuki-san said.*

Mizuto glanced at me before looking back down. "Reading. Isn't that obvious?"

"Uh-huh... Whatcha reading?"

"It's a cryptanalysis book in which the heroine is a personified English word."

That's certainly...unique. He does like weird books. But if I want to seduce him, I gotta go on the offensive! "Ooh. Cool! Lend it to me sometime." I showed understanding and interest! Doing that while in close proximity will make any guy think that you're into them! Or at least, that's what Akatsuki-san told me. Now, let those cheeks burn! Be overly self-conscious! You can't get me out of your head now, can you?!

"I borrowed it from Isana, so no," he said, turning the page.

"O-Oh..."

Let's take a beat to reflect on what happened. Why didn't things work out? Actually, wait. Is...this actually any different from how we usually interact? I hadn't gotten the sense that I'd made him any more self-conscious. If anything, I'd felt extremely self-conscious while trying to make my move. So was what I'd done any different from our usual interactions? Nope! And that's the problem.

I had no words. I swear my plans do work out sometimes! Seriously! Like ten percent of the time I'm on my game! But ninety percent of the time, things ended like this. I'd think I could do something, but in the end, nothing worked out. This is hard... How can I pull off being a femme fatale?!

The Person You Like Isn't Necessarily Your Type

The student council members weren't always in the student council room at the same time. Each of us had our own things going on, so it was normal for us to be down a member or two. There were even rare times when I found myself completely alone.

After being here long enough, I'd also started to realize that there was a certain trend to attendance. For example, Asuhain-san was rarely ever absent. Haba-senpai was pretty much only present when President Kurenai was. Aso-senpai would take off on whims, but if Hoshibe-senpai was around, chances were so was she.

Today, neither President Kurenai nor Haba-senpai was here. Hoshibe-senpai was lying down on the visitor's couch, using his phone, while Asuhain-san, Aso-senpai, and I worked at the meeting table on our laptops.

My task was to make flyers for the sports festival. Most writing-related activities fell under the jurisdiction of the secretary. Coincidentally, I felt as if my typing skills had improved since joining the student council.

"So, like, what kinda guys are you into, Yumechi?" This completely unrelated topic came from Aso-senpai, who'd also been rhythmically tapping away at her keyboard.

As vice president, she was, of course, responsible for supporting the president. But President Kurenai was already flawless to begin

with and could take care of everything by herself. Even if she couldn't, she still had Haba-senpai pretty much following her around everywhere. As a result, Aso-senpai's main responsibilities ended up being the education and support of the first-years—me and Asuhain-san.

Apparently, she'd been the secretary last semester, which was very helpful when it came to teaching me. Before I knew it, she'd begun calling me by a nickname—Yumechi. With her lending an extra hand, my work would get done so smoothly that we had the leisure of engaging in small talk.

"It's work time, not talk time, Senpai." The ever-serious Asuhain-san frowned.

I'd noticed that whenever her work involved writing, she'd frequently need to stop to roll her shoulders and neck. *Bigger really is inconvenient, huh?* I'd started noticing I was having similar problems, so I'd begun toying with the idea of working out.

In that regard, I was surprised that Aso-senpai didn't seem to be having any problems at all. Judging by how her clothes were puffed out, she was a decent size. Her waist was pretty thin, so maybe she had some kind of secret exercise regimen.

"Aw, s'all good," Aso-senpai said, completely ignoring Asuhain-san's comment. "Deepening bonds with my underclassmen's also part of the job. So, what about you, Ranran?"

"What *about* me?"

"What kinda guys are you into?"

"The kind that never even enters my field of vision."

Wow, so frank. She was staunch in her hate for romance. *Also, when did Aso-senpai start calling her "Ranran"?*

"Phew, that's a relief," Aso-senpai said, grinning for some reason. "My kid sister hates guys too."

"You have a younger sister?" *News to me.*

At this point, Aso-senpai was practically beaming. "Yep! Seventh grade and *suuuper* cute! Anyway, she's just like Ranran and not the biggest fan of guys. I don't think she hates 'em as much as Ranran, but that actually puts my mind at ease. I mean, that means she has room to grow as stubborn as Ranran. Then *no* guy'll ever approach her!"

"Uh... What about any of that puts your mind at ease?"

"The part where none of those animals'll be sniffing after my adorable kid sister!" This was worrying. In fact, I really feared for her little sister, and I'd never even met her. "So yeah, what about you, Yumechi? What's your type?"

"Do I...have to say?"

"There's nowhere to run. Now, out with it!"

My type? Well, the only things that come to mind all have to do with a

specific person. But, then again, it'll be suspicious if I don't say anything. I'll have to steer clear of specifics...

"Th-The intelligent type...maybe?"

"Uh-huh... What else? What about looks?"

"I guess...on the thinner side?"

"Oh, the cool type, huh? What about personality?"

"S-Someone who's usually cold, but has a kind side he shows on occasion...I guess?"

Oh my god, this is so embarrassing! It's like I'm listing everything I like about Mizuto!

Aso-senpai grinned. "Mm-hmm. I see. Nice! Straight out of a fairy tale! Wouldn't it be nice if that kinda shojo manga protagonist existed in real life?"

"Y-Yeah, I know, right?" *It would be nice if a guy like that were real.*

"So dumb..." Asuhain-san muttered.

Her words felt like a knife in my chest. *I-It's not like that! I cherry-picked elements of him! He walks around half naked after taking a bath, he curses after stubbing his toe against the sliding door—he has a lot of uncool sides to him!* By no means did I view him as some protagonist from a shojo manga! I wasn't some lovestruck middle schooler!

"Wh-What about you, Aso-senpai?"

"Hm? Me?" I'd intended to push the spotlight off of me, and she seemed eager to answer. "Well, I've been into the same type of guy forever. If I'm gonna go for a guy, he has to meet this *one* criteria."

"What is it?"

"He has to be twenty or more centimeters taller than me!"

Twenty centimeters? But...you're already pretty tall. Like, not much shorter than the average guy. My guess was that she was somewhere on the higher end of the hundred sixties.

"Wouldn't he have to be pretty tall?"

"Yeah, exactly! Ugh, like, why did I have to grow so much?" Aso-senpai let out a heavy sigh. *I guess everyone has an aspect about themselves they're hung up over even when they're as pretty as she is.*

"So, if you're looking for someone twenty centimeters taller than you, then...that'd be about 180 centimeters..."

Hm? Wait. My eyes fell on the third-year lying on the couch. He was close to 190 centimeters—a height very unusual for the average high schooler. Didn't he fit her criteria for a boyfriend? *I mean, who else but him...right?*

After I began to trail off, Aso-senpai's smile widened mischievously, and she stopped typing. She turned around to the couch and loudly said, "Senpai, now that I think about it, how tall are you?"

Wh-What?! Just like that?! I was stunned, but Hoshibe-senpai,

unfazed, didn't even look up from his phone.

"Huh? A hundred eighty-seven."

Hearing that, Aso-senpai stood up from her chair. "Oh, really? Aisa's a hundred sixty-eight centimeters."

Huh? In the next moment, Aso-senpai quickly moved over to the couch and leaned over to look down at Hoshibe-senpai. Then, in a very teasingly seductive voice, she said, "Aw, what a shame. You're short one centimeter."

Hoshibe-senpai blinked in confusion for a bit before frowning and turning on his side to look away from her. "Like I care, idiot."

She began giggling with satisfaction after seeing how her little prank had shaken him, putting him in a bad mood.



I stared with amazement. "Wow..."

"Huh?" Asuhain-san shot me a scrutinizing look in response to the word that'd just slipped out of my mouth.

I panicked and looked back at my laptop's screen, pretending that nothing had happened. Thanks to that, Asuhain-san returned to her work, seemingly thinking that she'd just heard things.

That playful yet flirty attitude... The way she had him dancing in the palm of her hand... That's it! That's exactly what I want to do to Mizuto!

Learning from a Master Femme Fatale

After we finished typing up the flyers, Aso-senpai and I moved to print everything out. Since there were a lot of copies to make, we couldn't use the printer in the student council room. Instead, we had to make a trip to the printing room to use the equipment there for a large print job. The printing room wasn't too spacious and had nothing more than a printer and copier lined up next to one another. Not many people came here, so it was a perfect space for private talks.

As I watched the printer spit out copy after copy, I nervously began my inquiry. "U-Uh, Aso-senpai..."

"Hm? What's up?" she asked, slightly tilting her head and crossing her long legs as she looked up at me. *She's cute even down to her movements... She's seriously so unbelievably girly and cute even though her body makes her seem more like a mature type.*

"Well, I...I wanted to ask for your advice."

"Oh? Sure! About what? Love?!"

She latched on a lot harder than I'd expected. Her hair bounced from side to side as she zoomed towards me. "Spill! Tell me *everything*! I love hearing all kinds of love talk unless it's about who you stan."

"You wouldn't like that?"

"Of course not! Thinking about a guy that might get close to Ranran just makes me so..." Aso-senpai's eyes narrowed and her fists began to shake. *So she stans Asuhain-san, huh? I thought she just liked to dote on her.* "Well, anyway, enough about me! What can I do ya for?"

"Well... I-It's nothing big, but..."

"But?"

"I was just wondering... How did you do that to Hoshibe-senpai back there?"

Aso-senpai tilted her head, confused. "Back there? With senpai? What specifically?"

"The seductive 'Aw, what a shame' move. You were like a femme fatale."

What if this just confuses her more? Had everything she'd done been

completely innate? Had *none* of that been planned? *Oh no, she's gonna label me the underclassman who asks her weird questions!*

I'd grown very anxious, but Aso-senpai didn't look confused. Instead, she furrowed her brow and closed her eyes for a little.

"You really want to know?" she asked in a heavy voice, her eyes still closed. "Do you truly wish to know my secrets?"

"Huh? Y-Yes, please!" I wasn't sure what vibe she was going for, but I figured it was best to play along.

Aso-senpai slowly opened her eyes and folded her arms across her chest as if she were trying to bolster her chest.

"Well, take a seat. There's much I've to say."

As instructed, I moved a folding chair opposite Aso-senpai and sat down. She once again folded her long legs and exhaled pretentiously.

"First, promise that you won't breathe a word of what I say to anyone."

"O-Okay."

"*Especially Senpai! Promise me, okay?!*"

"I-I promise..." *She's exerting so much pressure. Just what is she about to reveal to me?*

"My femme fatale moves are..."

"Yes...?"

"Just part of an act I put on."

"Uh... Yes, I know that."

"What?!" *Please wipe that genuinely surprised look off your face!*

Sure, there was a brief second when I wondered if it'd just been part of her personality, but then I realized that there wasn't a girl in existence who's naturally like that.

"Heh heh... You're quite impressive to have seen through my disguise, Yumechi." Aso-senpai had a dauntless smile on her face, but it was obviously just her way of skirting around what'd just happened. "Well, truth be told, I've been quite the otaku since my younger years."

"I had a feeling... What kind of stuff were you into?"

"Mm... The usual stuff? Y'know, anime, manga, and games... Oh, and I guess I dabbled in cosplay..." *Cosplay?! There are two people on the student council who like cosplay?! "This is also a secret, okay?! It'd be so annoying if it spread around school."*

"M-My lips are sealed."

"And, well... Uh, so... There's a certain something that I like to fantasize about."

"Oh? What...is it?"

Aso-senpai fell silent for a moment, averting her gaze. "An otaku princess."

"Oh..." I'd heard the term before, but only really vaguely knew

what it meant.

Otaku communities were usually male-dominated spaces. She was probably talking about being the only girl in one of those groups.

“Well, it’s like, I wanna be fawned over, y’know? As a girl, I wanna be validated! I don’t wanna have to put in as much effort as it takes to become an idol. I think it’d just be awesome to go somewhere and instantly be treated like a princess!”

“You’re very...true to your desires.”

“But... But, okay, hear me out—otakus like smaller girls, right? They typically like big boobs too! I mean—hey, I love those kinds of characters too! But look at me! I’m tall and not *that* well-developed. Frilly clothes don’t look good on me!” *Hm? Sure, she’s tall, but her boobs definitely are well-developed.* “So that’s why...at the very least, I wanted to *act* like that kind of character. I wanted to become a seductress who toyed with the hearts of otaku!” And then she pretended to sob.

Wait...I thought I was supposed to be getting advice here, not trying to comfort her. “W-Well you’re definitely cute, senpai. I think your hairstyle really suits you.”

“I know, right? You really know your stuff, Yumechi!”

And like magic, she was all better again. There were really all kinds of otakus. Aso-senpai was essentially the exact opposite of Higashira-san.

“I feel like a lot of things are falling into place. It makes sense why you like Asuhain-san so much.”

“I was so pissed when I first met her, though. I was all like, ‘What the hell is my ideal body doing there?!’ And, ‘Why must I be tested like this?!’”

“So I guess in regards to your type of guy, Hoshibe-senpai works because you seem small when next to him.”

“Oh, no. Nonono. H-He’s one centimeter short of being my type.” She suddenly became flustered and looked away. *Hm? She’s playing with her hair too.*

“Um...do you like Hoshibe-senpai?”

“Wha— No! Of course not! I just mess with him because of, uh, the process of elimination! Suzurin would kill me if I toyed with Joe. Senpai’s the only guy I can bother, so of course I’m gonna!”

She’s...really not good at hiding it! It was like looking in a mirror. I felt a strange sense of relief. *Not that I’m bad at hiding things like she is.*

“Anyway, let’s get back on track! You wanted to know the secret to my seductress moves, right?!”

“Oh, yes!”

“By the way...who are you planning on using these moves on?”

Oh no, she’s giving me a suspicious look. Does she think I might be

planning to hit on Hoshibe-senpai? “Well, nobody in the student council, at least. A first-year.”

“O-Oh.” She seemed to loosen up after that. *Good, I reassured her. I don’t know what it is, but I can’t help but feel amused by my upperclassmen on the student council.* Aso-senpai cleared her throat as if to change gears. “So anyway, allow me to pass down my teachings to you, young grasshopper.”

“Thank you!”

“There’s but one secret to tell!” She stuck up her finger before continuing. “You must simply do the things that you could only ever do to the person you like, while remaining composed.”

I took a little to digest her words, repeating them over and over in my head until I finally got it. It was like I could see for the first time. *All I have to do is look composed while doing things that I could only ever do to the person I like? I see.* If I did that, then he’d have no choice but to wonder what was going on in my head!

“Senpai!” I shot up from my seat and grabbed Aso-senpai’s hands. “Please... Please let me call you Master!”

Aso-senpai grinned. “Very well, my apprentice!”

The printer room was filled with sketchy laughter.

The Things I Couldn’t Do Unless I Liked You

Akatsuki Minami

“Whaddup? I’m gonna use your bath!”

I held my change of clothes in one hand while taking off my shoes before heading to the living room. Kawanami and I had an ongoing custom that we’d take turns going to each other’s places for baths when neither of our parents were gonna be home. It was more convenient and economical this way.

There was a period of time when we stopped this tradition of ours, but we’d started it up again. I was by no means—not even a tiny bit—lonely now that I had less hang time with Yume-chan due to her becoming busy with the student council. Out of our friend group, I’d become the only one who didn’t have anything to do after school. I wasn’t short of things I could do to kill time, but it kinda felt like my friends were leaving me behind.

“Maybe I should get a job...”

I’d dabbled in working for short periods of time, but my wallet wasn’t exactly hurting or anything. Though both Kawanami and I had parents who were essentially never around, they made up for that by giving us huge allowances.

I reached the living room, but was surprised to see that he wasn’t

there. "Huh?" I tilted my head while surveying the room, and then I heard the sound of water in the distance. *Oh, that's the bath. He's already taking one?*

I peeked into the changing room and saw a shadowy figure behind the frosted glass door to the bath. *He's sure taking his bath early. Did he work out or something?*

As I silently stared at the shadow moving behind the frosted glass, I could feel some kind of emotions stirring up within me. *Is this what it means to fall victim to temptation?* Was my Yume-chan deficiency paired with my boredom spurring my mind on? *Maybe I'll give him a scare.*

I entered the changing room, put my change of clothes on top of the washer machine, took off all my clothes, and wrapped my naked body in the towel that was usually left out for me. Then, I nonchalantly opened the door to the bath.

"Huh...?" Kawanami was in the middle of shampooing. He opened one eye and turned to me. His jaw dropped as he saw my sexy body. "Huh?!"

"Oh, you were already inside? Didn't notice."

"You goddamn liar!"

I shut the door behind me. "It's too annoying to put my clothes back on, so maybe I'll just stay and take my bath with you. I can even wash your back for you!"

"This is the worst..." Kawanami really did look like he hated this situation. He covered his lower half with a towel as I stared at it without reservation.

"What's the point of hiding it now?"

"I have absolutely zero obligation to show you anything. What about you? Why are *you* hiding anything?"

"Oh, yeah. Good point."

"H-Hey, stop!" He squeezed his eyes shut as I went to undo my towel.

I giggled teasingly. Then I leaned against his naked back and whispered into his ear. "Hm? Don't tell me you're nervous. Why? You've seen me naked before. Or maybe there's something about seeing my naked body that puts you in a *hard* position?"

"Knock it off with the dirty jokes."

"Hm? What was dirty about what I said?"

"Oh my god, you are the *worst*."

Hmph. You always talk about how unappealing my body is, but look at you now. Pathetic. But I had to toe the line, because if I went too far, I'd trigger his allergy and he'd break out in hives. I had to stop my teasing here, so I moved to pick up where he'd left off shampooing his hair.

"Any places that itch, sir?" I asked, pretending to be a barber.

"Yeah. Everywhere. Your tiny hands aren't helping at all."

"Oh, my deepest apologies."

"Ow! Don't claw me! You're gonna make me go bald!"

After covering his head in shampoo, I rinsed it all off with the shower head, revealing his usual flirty and wavy hair tips clumped together.

"Y'know, you'd probably look better if you didn't do anything to your hair."

"Shaddup. It doesn't matter if I'd look better or not. I like it this way. It's similar to how girls get manicures that guys don't like."

"Uh-huh..." *I think he looks cooler with straight hair though.*

"All righty, let's wash your body next."

"Already did."

"Liar. You're the type of guy who starts with your hair."

"How do you still remember that?"

Well, I do have some experience washing you from head to toe. "Don't worry, I'll only wash your back."

"Okay."

I spread some soap onto a towel and began rubbing it against his back. *It looks so much bigger than usual. Maybe I really should stop. My head's starting to get messed up. Images of my past mistakes keep flashing in my head.*

Back then, I'd loved everything about him—his skin, his muscles, even every last pore on his body. I was blinded by that and began treating Ko-kun like he was my possession. I thought that going all out for him would make him happy, but I never even bothered to stop to look at him.

It'd all been the result of childish immaturity, foolishness, and hubris. And I was way too traumatized by all of it to simply label it my "embarrassing history." Since then, I'd reflected and tried to work on myself, but I hadn't been able to fix that part of me just yet. I got the feeling that I'd been born this way and would have a number of similar situations in the future. *If that's so, then at the very least I should take some responsibility...no matter how little...for my biggest victim.*

"Hey..." I began talking into his back, feeling strangely clearheaded. "You should do it."

"Huh? *You* were the one who insisted on washing my back."

"No, I'm saying that...*you* should wash *my* back."

"Huh...?"

Kawanami turned around to look at me, his eyes wide. I rinsed the soap off of him and then grabbed his face, forcing him to look forward again.

"Face that way for a little." I brought another bath stool over and

faced away from him. Then, I undid my towel so that only my back would show. "You can look now."

I sensed him turn around again. He was silent for a bit before finally asking, "What're you up to?"

"I've washed you a million times already. I'm tired of it, so it's your turn."

"You're 'tired of it'?"

This is for your rehabilitation. It's time for you to get me back for all the times that I teased you. Maybe...just maybe, your wounds will heal this way. I moved my tied hair so that it draped over my shoulder, exposing the nape of my neck.

"Come on. Do it already."

Kawanami hesitated a little, but then pressed the towel against me and deeply exhaled. "Fine..."

I felt the soaped-up towel come in contact with my back. Within the sensation of the slippery bubbles and cloth, I could feel his strong fingers.

I squirmed a little. The slowly moving towel across my back tickled a little. This wasn't exactly the first time he'd touched my back, but for some reason, his hand movements were strangely gentle. The towel moved lower and lower. It went without saying, but like this, my butt was fully exposed. It wasn't exactly the first time he'd seen it, so I wasn't bothered. Just as I knew *all* of him, he knew *all* of me. That's just how childhood friends are.

"That good enough?" Kawanami asked after washing off the soap from my back.

Already? That's it? For some reason, I felt kinda cheated—like I hadn't gotten anything out of him. *I...* "No. Not yet." I slightly leaned back and lowered the towel covering my chest a little. "My front." I turned around and repeated myself. "Wash my front."

Kawanami's eyes widened and it looked like his ears were reddening. It might've just been the heat of the bath raising his body temperature, but that wouldn't have explained how confused he looked or why he was peeking at the small gap created by me slightly lowering my towel.

Kawanami's hands began to tremble and in the next moment, hives began to break out across his arms. "Urp... S-Sorry, I'm getting out!" Kawanami rushed out of the bath in a panic, leaving me stunned until a drop of condensation fell from the ceiling, snapping me out of it.

"How did I already screw things up...?" *I really can't change who I am.*

Afterwards, I washed myself while lamenting my actions, soaked

in the bath, and then got out. *Isn't he a little too self-conscious? All I asked him to do was wash my body. He totally overreacted.* Past me washed a *much* worse part of him.

He wasn't special in my mind anymore. All I wanted to do was take responsibility for what I'd done. As the perpetrator, I wanted to make amends. *I absolutely do not have a thing for him. Not in the slightest.*

"Hm? A message?" I muttered in the midst of my thoughts. I stopped drying myself and checked my phone.

Hm? LINE? Oh, it's from Yume-chan! I quickly opened it and saw the following message:

Yume: Random question, but what's an example of something you can only do because it's the person you like?

This really is random. I wonder what happened. That being said, this was a question from my beloved Yume-chan. I had to give this some serious and sincere thought. What I eventually came up with was this:

Akatsuki☆: Well... I guess it's impossible to take a bath with anyone else except the person you like.

Guys Suppress Their Emotions

Mizuto Irido

"Listen to me, Irido... Guys lose the instant they give in to seduction." I listened on the other side of the phone, my hips trembling as Kawanami continued his speech. "Some people might give you crap, saying you're an embarrassment for spurning a woman's advances, but a *real* man is one who controls himself and hides his shame. We're in the modern age—you can just shrug it off! Real honor is gained from *enduring* the 'shame' and proudly not giving in to cheap advances, which would have otherwise lowered both your *and* the woman's value. Ya feel me?"

"Hrnghh...!"

This strained voice came courtesy of Isana Higashira, who was also on the call. The three of us were all in our own rooms. Isana and I were following Kawanami's instructions, doing our best to hold a plank.

"Hold it. You got this! As guys, we gotta work for our muscles. But girls? To a certain degree, they just get their asses and boobs without having to do anything. Don't be swayed by those cheap pleasures that

they didn't even work for! You must have a body of steel and a mind of iron. Only then will you be able to turn the tables on them and their shallow attacks!"

In the next moment, I heard the sound of Isana exhaling and collapsing to the bed. Not too long after, my abs also reached their limit, and my face met the soft embrace of my bed sheets.

While Isana and I were practically gasping for air, Kawanami seemed perfectly fine. "A minute? Not bad, especially compared to when you first started."

To explain why we were working out on a three-way call, well...it was Kawanami's idea. It was all part of his plan to bulk me up because, apparently, my lanky body was too susceptible to being hit on by girls.

I couldn't deny that I was lacking in the muscles department, but I really hated getting sweaty. For the record, I'd complained to Kawanami before, but in his words: "*Irido, girls do all kinds of stretches and moisturizing for the sake of beauty. So it only makes sense that guys need to maintain the bare minimum of muscle, right?*"

Kawanami had a tendency to say things that sounded like they had some truth to them. In essence, just as girls worked to keep up their looks, guys should work to keep up their physiques. His reasoning was solid enough that it had even a cynical guy like me agreeing. But even so...

"Kawanami... Your reasoning... It's changed..." I managed to say through labored breaths.

"Hm? Has it?"

"It has!" Isana agreed. "What do you mean...breasts and rear ends are...to a certain extent...biologically determined for girls?!" she exclaimed through haggard breaths. "It is quite the difficult challenge to maintain both!"

I couldn't help but question how much effort she'd been putting into this "difficult challenge" if she was *this* lacking in stamina. Oh, and the reason she had joined us today was the decree of her mother, Natora-san.

"H-Hey, chill. I only said 'to a certain degree.'"

"No, there's something about you today," Isana pressed. "I sense a certain disdain towards women. Let me guess, something occurred between you and Minami-san. Am I incorrect?"

"Excuse me?! *Dead* wrong! What are you even basing that on, huh?!"

"See how defensive you grew? That's undeniable proof! If nothing occurred, you would not be displaying such a strong reaction!"

I couldn't think of anybody else *but* Minami-san as capable of rattling someone with as strong mental fortitude as Kawanami.

Judging from his statement, she must've tried to seduce him in some way, and then teased him for falling for it.

"Whatever. Anyway, the important thing is that you never *ever* let your dirty thoughts show. If they see you as an easy mark, your cred's gonna plunge. If that happens, there's no way in hell you'll ever get 'em to fall for you. Right, Higashira?!"

"Well...I would certainly prefer if Mizuto-kun were to view me with sexual desire. Personally, I already view him like that."

"This is the *exact* kinda person you should avoid! Got that, Irido?!"

"Please refrain from using me as a negative example!" Isana protested.

Regardless of where all this hate was coming from, I understood what Kawanami was trying to say. Girls that appreciated a guy who was obvious about his desires were few and far between. In Isana's case, she was only okay with it because we were so close.

"So, listen up—if Irido-san tries to go on the offensive, you gotta have an iron will and hold out. Do *not* react no matter what. This is your battle as a guy."

That girl was not one to "go on the offensive." I was pretty sure I was in the clear.

"Sorry, I gotta take a leak. Do some push-ups in the meantime, you two."

"Don't get lost!"

What a lame joke. Kawanami apparently had no desire to even acknowledge Isana's comment and walked off silently.

"Phew... All right, let's get started," I said.

I heard Isana let out a strained noise, and I reflexively looked down at my phone. Her video had suddenly flicked on.

"Hm?"

My brain took a hot minute to process the situation, but eventually, it caught up. Isana was in her usual casual T-shirt, and she had accidentally turned on her video. Her camera was positioned near her head, meaning that it was capturing her body. Gravity worked to pull down the collar of the T-shirt she used as a nightshirt, and it also pulled down two distinct plump, white fruits.

"Let's begin. One..."

They squished against the bed and then hung down. Then they squished again and then hung down.

"Isana..."

"Yes?"

"Are those push-ups even doing anything?"

"Huh? Aghh!" Her video turned off as she screamed.

Okay, Kawanami. I might need to suppress my emotions.

A Guy's Battle

After our workout, we got off the call, and I went to take a bath to wash off the sweat. I entered the room with the bath and began lightly poking my abs. *I think...they're kinda harder. Or are they?* It hadn't been too long since I'd started, so I'd likely not be seeing any real change just yet.

I poured water over myself to rinse off the sweat, then I got in the bath to warm my body up. I submerged myself up to my neck and felt any muscle fatigue I had fade away. But as I did, I sensed that someone was in the dressing room outside. *I guess someone's just using the sink.*

I wasn't the type of guy who enjoyed long baths, so after two minutes of soaking, I got out to wash. I always aimed to spend the shortest amount of time possible, but it seemed like I couldn't quite do that today. As soon as I went to get soap, the door to the bath rattled open.

"Huh?" I turned around and saw someone with only a white towel wrapped around their naked body—Yume Irido. *Huh? Uh. Huh? Why?* I was utterly confused. I quickly covered my lower half with a towel while successfully maintaining my composure despite this unprecedented situation. "Wha— O-Occupied," I said to my little stepsister.

"I know."

Then the door rattled closed as Yume shut it behind her, confirming that this hadn't been an accident. She'd come in *fully aware* I was in here.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

"Nothing much. I just thought it might be nice to wash your back for a change," she said with a faint smile. "What's the problem? We're family, after all."

Our sibling rule flashed through my head. Whoever said or did anything unbecoming of a sibling would become the younger sibling. After getting used to living together, I'd forgotten all about it. With that being said, was she *really* trying to make a move right now?

Then, Kawanami's words rang in my head. "*Guys lose the instant they give in to seduction.*" He'd also said that I could *never* let any of my dirty thoughts show in my actions or words. I had to have an iron will and hold out. His words had carved into my body along with the muscle training that we'd done.

I could see the curves of her breasts and waist under her towel. Her bare arms, shoulders, and thighs glistened as if they were sparkling. I tried my best to separate my mind from what my eyes were seeing. *That's right. Do not give in.* I couldn't give in to the things she'd been born with. I could hear Isana yelling at me for thinking

that, so I pushed imaginary Isana out of my mind too. And finally...

I exhaled and responded. "Yeah, I guess I don't mind every now and then. We *are* family, after all."

Maybe I imagined it, but I could've sworn that Yume's cheek twitched. *I'm not gonna react. Like hell I will. I will not give you the reaction you're looking for. This is a guy's battle.*

I Want to Make You Blush

"I'm not scrubbing too hard, am I?"

"Nah, you could even go a little harder."

"Okay."

Yume was washing my back. Her slender fingers pressed into me, scrubbing body soap onto me with a washcloth. This felt so unreal, but the reflection in the mirror didn't lie. There I was, a towel covering my lower half, hunched over while Yume knelt behind me, rubbing the washcloth up and down my back. That was enough to make me feel like I was going crazy, but this only seemed to encourage Yume.

"Heh heh, you're burlier than I expected. Here I thought you were nothing but skin and bones."

Impossible. No way my workouts are already showing results.

Logically, I knew this to be true, but the almost tickling sensation on my back was stirring my heart. *Calm down. Calm down! Do not react. Be cool.*

"Really? I think I'm pretty bony."

"No, you're not. Look at your shoulder blades—" *Huh?! Don't touch them with your bare hands!* "Even your waist is much meatier than a girl's."

"That...tickles."

"Oh, so sorry. I couldn't stop myself from touching you."

Goddamn it! It's so hard to keep a poker face! I see you looking at me in the mirror!

"Ha ha ha..."

"Heh heh heh."

As I tried to get past this dangerous situation with a laugh and a dauntless smile, Yume at long last reached for the showerhead and began rinsing the soap off my back.

I took that opportunity to quickly say something. "I'll do the front myself."

"You sure? Okay, but no need to hold back on my account."

That was a close one. It doesn't look like she's gonna go any further. If this were the world of manga or light novels, she might have used something other than her hands—specifically two very round parts of

her body. If she had, there was no way I could've kept my cool.

Maybe I shouldn't have felt so relieved so fast, because Yume immediately seized the opportunity to go on the attack once more. As soon as I took the washcloth with the body soap on it from her, she said the unexpected.

"Now I'll wash your hair for you." *Huh?* "Doesn't it feel good to have someone else wash your hair? Come on, turn towards me."

"No, wai—"

"Turn around already."

She made me turn a hundred eighty degrees around. My eyes had no choice but to take in the full figure of the towel-clad Yume.

As our gazes met, Yume smiled. "Okay, close your eyes."

"Agh—"

Water gushed over my head. After my hair was wet enough, she spoke again.

"Move over a bit. I need to grab the shampoo." I cracked my eyes open just as Yume bent past me. "There...we go."

As I leaned to my right to avoid her, I saw that both her back and butt were in full view. Plus, my left leg was right under Yume's stomach—in other words, it was essentially sandwiched in between her chest and thighs. If she slipped even a little bit, her soft parts would come into contact with me.

Don't react. Do not react. It doesn't matter that I can tell how thin her waist is or how round her butt is through the towel. Don't pay any mind to the hanging balls of fat near your left leg either. Just focus everything on steeling your body and riding out this disaster!

"Got it! Okay, look down."

Yume grabbed the shampoo, returned to her initial position, had me look down, and began to scrub my hair. Usually, getting your hair washed by someone else felt good and made you feel kinda safe, but right now, I felt like I was in danger. The view I got from hanging my head was so, so much worse than when I'd been peering through the gaps of my wet bangs.

"Any places that itch, sir?"

There's no way she doesn't realize. She has to be doing this on purpose. If I looked just a little bit upwards, I'd be face-to-face with her cleavage, which was poking out of her towel. *She's gotta know, right?!*

They're big... Usually, I was with Isana, so my sense of what was big versus what was small might have been warped, but seeing her boobs this close made me realize that they were definitely on the larger side.

The two swellings on her chest pressed together to create distinct cleavage. More importantly, though, her towel was doing its best to keep them pinned down, but every time she moved her arms,

they...jiggled. Or at least, I got the sense that they did.

They also had a very beautiful shape. Even without the support of a bra, they were perky and seemingly unaffected by gravity—wait. *No bra? Really?* I thought back to not too long ago when she'd come out in front of me wearing supposedly nothing but a towel, but even then, she'd been wearing underwear. Who's to say that today wasn't the same? If I had to guess, her goal today was to tease me, meaning that it was more than likely that she'd prepared some kind of punch line. She'd probably giggle and say something like: *"Why were you so nervous when I wasn't even naked?"*

I've seen through your tricks. Now, I had nothing to fear. Knowing that she was wearing underwear or a swimsuit didn't change the fact that her cleavage was right in front of me, but I had nothing to fear. I didn't have to pretend to be calm. I could feel peace flowing throughout my body.

"How'd it feel to be washed by me?" she asked triumphantly.

I wiped the drops of water from my bangs. "Not bad. I might not mind doing this again sometime. It's nice not having to move my arms."

"That's...it?"

"Yeah...? But more importantly, shouldn't you warm up your body? Sure, we're in the shower area, but you must be cold, dressed like that. You should take a dip."

"Huh?"

I smirked and let out a chuckle. "Keep any *fabrics* you have on out of the bath, though, okay? It's unhygienic." *Fabrics included towels, of course, but also underwear and bathing suits.* "Oh, I know. It'll be a pain to have to get dressed again, won't it? Since you're already here, you might as well wash yourself too."

There's no way she can, though. After all, she's wearing something underneath the towel. Now that I've seen through your tricks, it's only a matter of time before you resort to the only option left to you—retreat.

I glanced over at Yume, who was recoiling. *Checkmate. I guess I was a step ahead. Better luck next time. Ha ha ha!*

"Yeah..." In the middle of my mental victory lap, Yume began to hesitantly touch the knot that fastened the towel around her body. "It *would* be annoying. Maybe I will get in."

Hm? What now? To my surprise, Yume stood up, walked over to the bathtub, put both her feet in, and sat on the edge. *She's not gonna claim that counts as getting in, is she?* My guess was off. Way off. With her back turned to me, she unraveled the towel and spread it open.

Her towel blocked everything, and I couldn't quite see from where I was sitting, but I did manage to catch a small glimpse of her red ears, peeking out from underneath her black hair.

“Don’t...look too much...” she pleaded softly.

That snapped me back to reality, and I frantically looked away. *No way. No way, right? She can’t be fully nude. We can’t both be naked in this small space together, can we?* I’d been so sure of myself before, but now my mind felt paralyzed by doubt.

Leaning her body against the side of the bath helped hide her from the chest down, but it wasn’t perfect. Just by standing up a little, I could see into the bathtub...meaning I’d see Yume without a single thread of clothing on her. *If...if that happened—* My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a towel dropping. Then there was the sound of a body submerging itself. And then...there was the sound of what sounded like a large amount of powder being poured.

“Huh?”

“Phew.” Looking over, Yume had submerged herself up to her neck in what was now white, bubbly bathwater. “Ooh, this feels good! I need to thank mom for buying this.”

B-Bath powder?! I remembered seeing it on the windowsill. She put that in the bath?! This means that as long as she’s in the bathtub, her naked body will have the protection of the bubbles. She no longer needs the protection of her towel!

“Huh? What’s the matter, Mizuto?” Yume asked with a teasing giggle as she rested her arms on the edge of the bathtub and lay her chin on top. “Is something...not living up to your expectations?”

Goddamn you! “No... I’ve just never used bath powder before, so I was curious about it.”

“Oh, really? Then...” She tilted her head. “Wanna join me?”

She’s getting so full of herself! “N-No, that’s kinda...”

“Really? What a shame. Your loss,” Yume said in a calm voice while submerging her porcelain shoulders.



Then, she stuck her feet out of the water. “Aw, you were so close. You could’ve so easily seen me naked.” She flicked the water with her feet like a kid. “Well, if you really want to...you’ll just have to step up and do it yourself.”

That’s definitely a line she prepared beforehand... What the hell do you mean “step up and do it yourself”?! Do you want me to strip you or something?! You’re really looking down on me! Yume giggled and continued kicking the water, in a good mood.

“Well, I guess you *are* at that age. You must be suuuper curious about a girl’s naked body. But I guess you know now that it’s not so easy to see one in real life. Oh, isn’t that nice? You learned something.”

Goddamn it! I’d thought this had been a last-ditch ploy, but it’d been a part of her plan all along! Her level of preparation had been the deciding factor in this competition. As much as I hated to admit it, I had no choice but to admit my loss.

“Let me just say, though, I’m not as unguarded as Higashira-san. Today’s special. I normally wouldn’t even give you a glimpse of my underwear.” Then I heard a sound, like something being uncorked. *Hm? Did something just get...pulled out?* “Anyway, you look calm on the surface, but I had no idea you were actually such a lecher. You act like you have no interest in girls, but when you’re actually in a situation...”

Yume was in such a good mood, prattling on, that she hadn’t noticed. Even if she wasn’t aware of what was going on yet, there was no doubt that it was well underway. *The bubbles covering her body are getting lower!*

“H-Hey, the water!” I frantically pointed out as the water level dropped low enough that it just barely covered the top half of her chest. *Sh-She really isn’t wearing anything...*

“Huh? Huh?! Wh-Why? Ah— The stopper!”

Just as the peaks of her mounds were about to be visible, she frantically covered them with her arm while using the other one to grope around for the stopper. My guess was that when she was kicking the water, either her foot or hand had snagged the stopper and pulled it out. As long as she was able to stick it back in the drain, she’d be okay, but...

“I-I can’t see anything. Where... Where’s the stopper?!”

Thanks to the bubbles, she couldn’t see anything. While she continued to search for it, the water level continued to drop. Now, her slender waist and small belly button were visible. If this continued, her lower half—her crotch and butt—would become visible. It was only a matter of time.

Thinking about this rationally, it'd be best for me to leave right now. If I weren't here, then it wouldn't be a problem if all the water vanished and her full naked body was exposed. But I was freaking out. My head had boiled over. It was almost like the feeling you get from staying in the bath for too long.

"Stupid! Pull it back by the chain!" Maybe that's why I jumped up without thinking and reached into the bathtub to grab the dangling chain. I leaned over, forgetting to even cover myself with a towel.

"Wha?" Yume's eyes widened.

At the same time, I felt a breeze on my lower half. And then, time stopped. A silence fell between us, only interrupted by the gurgling of the bubbly water going down the drain. Yume's chest was hidden by her arm and hand. The area around her exposed waist was mostly covered by her tightly closed thighs, providing a strong defense for her most sensitive area. In contrast though, the area around my waist was...

Perhaps unable to look away, Yume stared straight at it, her face becoming redder and redder, like a boiled crab. I, however, was becoming as pale as a ghost. There was only one option at this point. I picked up my towel off the ground, covered my crotch and...quickly ran out of the room, hunched over, shutting the door behind me, leaving Yume completely naked in the now empty bathtub.

I stiffly dried myself off while vacantly staring up at the ceiling fan. Yume was the only thing on my mind. I could see her slender fingers digging into her soft skin, the gap of flesh on her arm as she tried to press it against her boobs. And then, I remembered the dark area in between her tightly shut thighs. I tried examining every last bit of those memories. I tried *really* hard and finally came to the conclusion that...I hadn't seen anything. On the other hand, she'd seen *everything*.

"Isn't this backwards...tropewise?"

It was then that I learned how hard it was to scream like they did in manga.

All Humans Are Perverts

Yume Irido

"I...saw it..."

I'd left the bath, changed into my pajamas in the dressing room, and then returned to my room. I threw myself onto the bed and clutched my pillow against my chest while replaying the scene over and over again. The image of *it* had been burned into my eyes. When his towel fell, I'd seen Mizuto's...

“Ohgodohgodohgod!!! I so saw it, I saw it, I saw it, I saw it, I saw it!”

I saw *it*. I saw Mizuto’s... Despite his cute face, despite his quiet personality, despite his calm demeanor... Down there, he was...he was so... I rolled back and forth across my bed, kicking my legs. It... It was amazing. I felt as if my world had changed. After all, up until recently, I’d been living with just my mom. I had no memory of ever taking a bath with my dad, so this was my first time seeing one of those. The first one I had ever seen...was Mizuto’s.

“Heh... Heh heh heh...”

No, Yume. Yume, stop! You’re being considerably gross. Don’t be like Higashira-san. But, hm, so that’s what Mizuto’s looks like down there. Like, really? Am I gonna be okay? When we get to that stage, am I gonna be able to do it all right? H-Huh? Now that I think about it, when we were dating, we were extremely close to doing it.. Was he planning on using that to do it to middle school me? Oh god, that’s scary! So scary!

I let out a long, hot exhale. I needed to calm myself down. Akatsuki-san was a huge pervert, and, of course, so was Higashira-san. But surprisingly...I was pretty perverted too. Most people might not know this, but guys aren’t the only perverted ones. Girls are too. They have their own perverted daydreams, and they get really worked up when they see perverted things too. *All humans are perverts*. Someone like Asuhain-san might not have understood that, though.

“Mizuto, you pervert—lecher,” I whispered into my pillow while grinning and giggling. *I’m the same, though. No matter how calm you play it from now on, it won’t bother me one bit. Got it?*

Being a Year Older Doesn’t Make You Better

“Thank you very much, Senpai!” The next day, I happily reported my victory to Aso-senpai with a huge grin on my face.

“Oh, it went well?! Congrats, Yumechi!”

“Thank you! It’s really all thanks to you!”

I’d found the perfect time to have this conversation with Aso-senpai since we were now in the student council room by ourselves.

She folded her arms and proudly nodded. “Your results were guaranteed the instant I passed on my teachings! By the way, though, how’d you do it? I’m sure you didn’t go as far as I did, but one of my good points is how I proactively learn from my students. I’d love to hear more about what happened in as much detail as possible!”

“Well, uh...” I couldn’t help but giggle, embarrassed. *Out of respect for her since she helped give me accurate advice, I should give her the full report.* “So...I barged in on him taking a bath...”

“A...bath?”

“Oh, of course, I went in with a towel on. At first, he looked so calm, but just like you told me, he started to show cracks in his facade. That was so cute, and admittedly, I got a little ahead of myself and messed up a bit, but in the end, I got the reaction I wanted, so it was all good!”

I wasn't sure if I even took a breath. I spilled everything that had happened. After all, this was the first time I'd done something that actually worked out! Usually, I'd mess up in some way and end up in a worse position, but not this time!

“Oh. Wow... That's. So. Cool... Good. For. You...”

H-Huh? “S-Senpai? Is something wrong?” Her speech is so mechanical and robotic.

“Nothing. At. All...”

“You're acting weird, like you've been turned into a robot!”

Did I say too much? Did I talk too fast and excitedly, like an otaku? But more importantly, why does it look like her eyes have lost all light?!

While I freaked out, Aso-senpai began muttering in a depressed voice. “By the way...”

“Yes?”

“Do you have...experience being in a relationship, Yumechi?”

“Oh. Sorry I never told you.” That was vital information for her to give me love advice. I needed to be honest. “I had a boyfriend in middle—”

“Impure!!!” Aso-senpai suddenly screamed out before running out of the room.

“Huh?!?”

“Kids these days are too impure!!!” Her voice gradually got fainter as she disappeared into the distance.

I-Is it that unusual to have had a boyfriend in middle school? I think Akatsuki-san had a boyfriend too, so I don't think it's that big a deal. After some time, President Kurenai returned to the room from the direction that Aso-senpai had run off in.

“Did something happen? Aisa ran off crying.”

“Well... I was just asking her for some advice.”

“Ha ha... Let me guess—romantic advice?”

Even Haba-senpai, who'd trailed in behind her, shrugged his shoulders as if to say “good grief.”

“She reaps what she sows, after trying to do something beyond her ability. She's chased after Hoshibe-senpai for almost an entire year without any real progress.”

“Huh? An...entire year?”

“Well, of course. We've been friends since we joined the student council, and I *tried* pushing her to make a move on Hoshibe-senpai before he stepped down as president, but she kept dragging her feet.

Now I'm trying to get her to do something before he graduates."

"Um, by the way... Has Aso-senpai had a boyfriend before?"

"From what I hear, she hasn't had any luck in that regard. Up until now, she's only had interest in anime and games."

Wait... How many people have I gone to for love advice who haven't actually had any success at it themselves?

"Good grief. I bet she was running away out of frustration that her underclassman one-upped her. I'm sorry she's so childish. Out of curiosity, what did you say to her?"

"I said that I had a boyfriend in middle sc—"

"Impure."

"Why?!"

There are too many innocent people on this student council! Save me, Akatsuki-san!

The Way You See Me

The Darkness and Adoration of the Serious Girl

Yume Irido

Asuhain-san and I were currently in the student council room, hard at work brainstorming what prompts we could have for the sports festival's treasure hunt.

"How about 'a family member'?" I proposed. *I'm really grasping at straws here.*

Asuhain-san looked at me, unamused. "What if they're an orphan? What then?"

"Huh? We have to consider *that* many possibilities? But...yeah, I guess I can't say that it could never happen."

"But more importantly, why are you proposing *people*? This is a treasure hunt. Keep it to inanimate objects."

"Well, we gotta keep things interesting," I argued. "Treasure hunts are all about the entertainment factor."

"Hm, this is tricky..." Asuhain-san murmured, going back to her thoughts.

Our school had a special rule by which participants started by drawing the hardest prompts. That being said, if the prompt they drew was too difficult, they could go to a different box and exchange it for an easier one. They could keep going to different boxes with progressively easier prompts until they found one they could handle.

However, if someone wanted an easy prompt, they'd have to consider the trade-off of running to the next box with easier prompts versus using that time to complete the harder prompt. It was a fairly well-balanced game, but it fell on us to prepare the prompts, and we'd decided to start with the difficult ones first. *This is hard...* We were completely stumped.

"No matter how hard we make the prompts, we have to make sure that they're fair and doable for everyone," Asuhain-san said.

"Then what about something standard like, 'person you like'? That way, they could choose a friend too, not just someone they have a crush on."

"What about people who don't have friends?"

"W-Well... They could get a new prompt. I don't think we have to overthink it that much..." But also, if I'd gotten that prompt in middle

school, it would have upset me. As a first-year middle schooler, I hadn't had a single friend or boyfriend to my name.

"Then let's keep it simple with something uncommon," Asuhain-san continued. "How about 'person who's won a spelling bee'?"

"Oh, criteria-based prompts might not be a bad idea. But if we want to hype up the crowd, we need more personal prompts..."

"Do you want to put in romantic-type prompts *that* badly, Iridosan?" Asuhain-san glared at me through half-closed eyes.

I reflexively let out a nervous laugh. "I-It's not that I *want to*...but some people really enjoy them, so..."

"I just don't get it..." Asuhain-san muttered, pouting. "Like, hate, boyfriend, girlfriend—where's the fun in stuff like that?"

"Well...I think it really depends on the person, but..."

From what I understood, Asuhain-san was completely turned off from romance due to being bullied in the past. I was very aware that people like her existed. If I hadn't met Mizuto, I might have turned out the same way.

"Well, what do you find fun, Asuhain-san?"

"Huh? W-Well..." She pressed a finger to her plump lips. "I think there might be nothing more enjoyable than when guys who're bigger than me look at the grade rankings and see that they're below me." Her expression darkened, and a creepy smile spread across her face, making me tense up. *What kind of darkness is she hiding?* "You should start studying, you know. I've already begun to prepare for the midterms."

"Huh? Really? Already?"

Midterms were scheduled to begin after the sports festival—the end of October. Sure, they were on my radar, but I was putting everything I had into getting used to my work on the student council. I hadn't even begun preparing for them. *Plus, there's an even more important event after midterms...*

Suddenly, the door to the student council room opened. "I'm back. Making progress?"

"O-Oh," I stuttered, caught off guard. "Welcome back, President Kurenai."

"W-Welcome back!"

President Kurenai had entered with Haba-senpai right behind her, who promptly walked to his seat and opened up his laptop without a word. Meanwhile, President Kurenai came over to peek at our notes.

"Looks like you're having some difficulties."

"Yes... It's hard to make prompts that are simultaneously difficult and fair to everyone."

"I see... A fair prompt..." She put her hand to her chin. "Do you have any good ideas, Joe?"

Haba-senpai momentarily stopped typing. “Since it’s up to the judges to decide whether or not the participants successfully fulfilled the prompt, one option is to keep the wording vague.”

“Hm. In essence, broadening the room for interpretation may make it less difficult to satisfy the prompt. It *does* bring up the risk of the judges rejecting everything that doesn’t meet their criteria; however, it also fits the criteria for a difficult prompt. For example, you could do a fill-in-the-blank style prompt of ‘X person,’ such as ‘tall person.’”

“It goes without saying, but you’ll also have to avoid prompts that might be misused as insults,” Haba-senpai added.

Oh! I see... That’s a smart way of going about it. It’s a good way to simultaneously display the personalities of the participants and get the crowd excited.

“In that case, allow me to submit a prompt.” Kurenai-senpai then took a marker and wrote something, neatly folded it up, and put it into the box.

“What did you write?”

“That’s for me to know and for you to eagerly anticipate,” she said with a wink.

The way she said that was both cool and cute, and I couldn’t help but think it was unfair that she could be both. Asuhain-san was practically melting. Her face had gone red, and she was clutching her chest. She might’ve been anti-romance, but it seemed she was still capable of getting pangs for people.

President Kurenai sat in her chair before calling out to us again. “How about the two of you take a break and go out to help Aisa? She’s meeting with the cheer squad, and I think she could use some backup.” She flashed a glance at Haba-senpai.

Oh? She then looked right at me, and that was all I needed to instantly understand what she was getting at. She wanted to be alone with him.

“But we’re in the middle of work. We shouldn’t—”

“Asuhain-san,” I started. *Oh, okay. Twist my arm, why don’t you.* “We don’t necessarily have to be here to continue thinking about prompts. We’re not exactly pressed for time, so let’s go help Aso-senpai.”

“Okay. I guess...” She reluctantly stood up and left the room with me.

As we left, she shot a look behind us—not because she’d suddenly come up with a prompt but to look at President Kurenai’s face.

After I shut the door, I turned to Asuhain-san. “Did you want to spend more time with President Kurenai?”

“Huh?!” Her small shoulders jumped, and she turned around,

frowning. “O-Of course not! I’m not a kid...”

Suddenly, I thought back to the conversation I’d overheard between President Kurenai and Haba-senpai in that empty classroom during the cultural festival. I had no clue what President Kurenai would try doing to Haba-senpai in the student council room with nobody around, but I knew that if Asuhain-san caught wind of any of it, she’d faint.

Asuhain-san’s innocence was so precious and endearing yet so fragile. I found myself reaching out and patting her on the head. “You’re a good girl.”

“Are you making fun of me?!”

Aw, she got mad at me. But now I kinda get why Aso-senpai dotes on her so much.

Big Boobs Make Friendships

As instructed, the two of us headed towards the meeting room where we’d be speaking with the cheer squad regarding the sports festival. I hadn’t expected to run into a familiar face, though.

“Yume-chan!!!”

“Wha— Akatsuki-san?!” As soon as we entered the room, a small body jumped onto me. I was so surprised, I could only blink. “What are you doing here?”

“Hm? What do you mean? I’m part of the cheer squad.” She pressed her nose into my neck and started sniffing. “Oh, yeah... That’s the stuff...”

“You’re acting like a creep!”

I peeled Akatsuki-san’s deeply buried face off the nape of my neck, much to her dismay. She loudly whined, voicing her discontent, but I didn’t pay her too much attention. *This isn’t any different from her usual antics.*

Akatsuki-san pouted, but she was obviously faking it. “Aw, come on. Just a little. It’s been forever since we’ve been together after school!”

“Is that why you joined the cheer squad?”

“My, do I sense admiration for how deep my love runs for you?!”

“No, rest assured, that’s not it. If anything, I’m deeply grossed out.”

“Rude!”

It was true that I hadn’t been spending much time with Akatsuki-san since I’d joined the student council. It’d been in the back of my mind that she might have been a little lonely since our other friends, Nasuka-san and Maki-san, were also in clubs, but never in my wildest dreams had I expected her to chase after me. I’d obviously

underestimated her.

Jokes aside, the cheer squad had most likely invited her, and she'd accepted because she was bored and had nothing better to do. She'd helped other sports clubs before, so it wouldn't be too much of a long shot to assume that something similar had happened.

"Um..." Asuhain-san tugged on my sleeve from behind. "Your friend?"

"Oh, sorry, Asuhain-san. This is a classmate of mine, Akatsuki Minami-san. She's a little intense with the physical contact, but she's not a bad person."

The way Asuhain-san was hiding half of herself behind me reminded me of Higashira-san. *I still remember how she hid behind Mizuto when she first met Akatsuki-san.* I hadn't anticipated Asuhain-san to be so timid, but maybe she was acting like this due to a fear spurred on by her natural instincts.

"Hm?" Akatsuki-san seemed to notice Asuhain-san and began staring at her, possibly surprised by the rare occurrence of meeting someone her height. "Is this the girl on the student council that you mentioned before?"

"Yes. She's a first-year like us. Her name's—"

"*Asuhain,*" she butted in before I could finish introducing her.

Oh, right. She doesn't like her full name. Despite the brusque introduction, Akatsuki-san was, as usual, unperturbed. She returned the coldness with a warm, friendly smile and quickly moved towards her.

"Nice to meetcha! We're, like, the same height! I'm so relieved to have another small comrade... Wait...small...?"

Akatsuki-san's eyes fell down from Asuhain-san's face as if they'd been caught by a magnetic pull—fixated on the large protrusions underneath her uniform. Despite being covered by two layers—a blouse and a blazer—her breasts were clearly outlined. Her tie almost looked like a river flowing between two mountain ridges. *Oh, crap.*

But by the time I'd realized my failure, I saw that all the light in Akatsuki-san's eyes had vanished. "What...the hell...are these *tits*?!" A guttural scream of envy and anger burst out, and Akatsuki-san's hands flew out and grabbed Asuhain-san's chest.

"Wh-Wha—?"

Asuhain-san still hadn't grasped what was going on, but Akatsuki-san had begun to strongly knead the two mounds on Asuhain-san's chest.



“Th-They’re real! How, when she’s *this* short?! How could fate be so cruel?! Where’s the equality?!”

“H-Hey, you! Wh-What are you doing?!”

“This isn’t fair! The world isn’t fair!”

“A-Ahn!”

“Calm down, Akatsuki-san! Down girl,” I said, trying to calm her down as if she were a rampaging horse. I wrenched Akatsuki-san off of Asuhain-san and restrained her from behind.

Asuhain-san covered her chest, her face flushed. “Wh-What is your problem?! Why would you grab the chest of someone you’re meeting for the first time?!”

“I needed to confirm with my own two hands the unfairness of the world! To think fate’s blueprint could contain such an anomaly!”

“Uh... In other words, she’s jealous that you have a better body than hers despite being the same height,” I interpreted.

Asuhain-san frowned and looked down at her chest that she was still covering with her hands. “There’s nothing good about having these. My shoulders ache, it hurts to run, I can barely see my feet, and guys ogle me all the time... If anything, I’m envious of your slender body.”

“Oh, cool. I’m gonna kill you, ’kay?” Akatsuki-san said with a bright smile.

I considered translating her words once more, but I realized she’d said exactly what she’d meant.

“Pfft. Ha ha ha ha!” As I thought about how to mediate things, I saw Master—Aso-senpai—clutching her belly and laughing while walking towards us. “Yumechi, I love that girl! Her hate for big boobs is so straightforward!”

“S-Sorry, Senpai... I didn’t mean to make a commotion before the meeting.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. There’s still time before we get started. Also, I fondled her when we first met too.”

Asuhain-san shot Aso-senpai a weary look and took a step back. *Why are there so many people around me who fondle people when they meet for the first time?*

Aso-senpai bent over a little to look Akatsuki-san in the eye as I continued to restrain her. “Aisa Aso. I’m a second-year and the vice president. Nice to meet you...Minami-san?”

“Akatsuki Minami! Nice to...” Her eyes once again fell to the chest of the person she was talking with.

There was about a twenty-centimeter height difference between Aso-senpai and Akatsuki-san, so the former obviously had to bend down. Even if her breasts weren’t as large as Asuhain-san’s, they were

still on the larger side, and bending only served to emphasize them. *Oh, no! Akatsuki-san's gonna get jealous again!* Her eyes remained focused on Aso-senpai's chest for a few seconds before her lips began moving again.

"Nice to meet you, Senpai!" Akatsuki-san said as if nothing had happened. Her smile had no trace of animosity in it.

This time it was Aso-senpai's smile that stiffened. "Uh...huh? Why aren't you jealous of my boobs, Minami-san?"

"Hm? Do you want me to say it out loud?" Akatsuki-san asked, tilting her head.

What's she talking about? I looked at Asuhain-san, who exhaled in frustration. *Huh? Am I the only one who doesn't get it?*

Aso-senpai paused before grabbing Akatsuki-san by the hand. "Let's have a quick chat," she said, dragging her out to the hallway to have a secret conversation. Ten seconds or so later, they came back, shoulder to shoulder. "Yumechi! Akki really gets it!"

"Yume-chan, you have a really great upperclassman!"

There was something fishy about the way they laughed in unison after that. It should've been a good thing that my upperclassman and my friend were getting along, but I couldn't shake the unsettling feeling I got from seeing the two of them together.

Protecting the Honor of the Student Council President

After the meeting with the cheer squad ended, Asuhain-san, Aso-senpai, and I returned to an empty student council room.

"Hm? Where is everyone?"

Asuhain-san surveyed the room disappointedly. "How strange. I was sure that Haba-senpai and President Kurenai should've been here."

"Maybe they had business they needed to take care of," I suggested, walking over to the table.

As I did, I noticed that Haba-senpai's laptop hadn't been shut. Upon further inspection, it was unlocked, and a spreadsheet was displayed, the cursor still blinking. *Would he really leave his laptop unprotected like this?*

"Oh! Are you two coming up with ideas for the treasure hunt?" Aso-senpai asked, noticing the box on the table. "Looks like you're struggling. If you want, I can show you last year's. You can even reuse them if you want."

"You still have them?"

"Yeah, they're probably in the documents room."

"I'll take a look," I said, heading to the room that Hoshibe-senpai frequently used for his naps. Just as I reached out to the doorknob, I

thought I heard voices.

“...Please...off me...they’ll...back soon...”

“...Quiet...no need...get caught...”

I opened the door, only to find President Kurenai on top of Haba-senpai in the dark room.

“Ah.”

Then, they turned and noticed me, and they both let out an “Ah” as well.

Silence fell for a few seconds. During this time, I noticed that the buttons on her blouse had been undone, revealing her sexy black bra. On the other hand, the majority of Haba-senpai’s buttons were firmly fastened. I got a decent idea of what had happened here, and because I understood, I slowly shut the door.

“Wai—” Haba-senpai tried to call out for help, but I’d already shut the door.

President Kurenai sure is bold... It was amazing how Haba-senpai had not broken from being subjected to her persistence for an entire year. Maybe I needed to learn that kind of attitude not just from Aso-senpai but also from President Kurenai. But then again, the guys in the student council had been subjected to the advances of the girls for an entire year and hadn’t budged a bit. Their defenses were too strong.

Either way, I’m going to pretend I didn’t see anything. It’s gonna be my way of supporting her. I quietly moved away from the documents room. It wasn’t like I had any important business there. I figured I’d give them some alone time.

“Ah—”

I looked over, hearing a sound, and saw that the mug that’d been next to Haba-senpai’s laptop had been knocked over. But also, standing there was a girl who’d been splashed by the black liquid inside, staining the chest area of her white blouse.

“I-I’m so sorry! I didn’t think there was anything left in it!”

“Are you okay, Ranran?! Did you get burned?!”

“No... It’s not hot.”

“Phew. That’s a relief!” Aso-senpai let out a sigh of relief.

It looks like Haba-senpai didn’t finish his coffee, and Asuhain-san knocked it over. It must be hard to judge distance with boobs that big. I can totally see her running into doors.

“You should take it off and wash it immediately. Do you have a change of clothes, Ranran?”

“I had phys ed today, so I have my gym clothes with me. I’ll change in the documents room.”

“Okay!”

Asuhain-san pulled out a bag with her gym clothes in them and began moving towards the documents room. *Wait. The...what room?*

The one I just came out of? It was time for me to get involved.

“W-Wait. Stop!” I frantically blocked the door to the documents room.

“Wha—” Asuhain-san stopped, surprised. “Wh-What are you doing? Please move, Irido-san.”

“Y-You can’t go in there.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Well, uh...it’s...it’s dusty! Yeah! It’s so dusty and dirty! Wouldn’t want your hair and body to get dirty with dust, now would we?!”

“That happens all the time. It doesn’t really bother me.” Asuhain-san glared at me.

Ugh, I don’t know what else I can say!

“What’s gotten into you, Yumechi?” *Oh, right! Aso-senpai! She can help!* “Huh? What? What are you doing with your eyes? Hm? The laptop and documents room...”

My eyes desperately danced back and forth until Aso-senpai let out a small sound of understanding. Then she started to panic too. *Thank you, Master! I knew I could count on you! You’re so perceptive!*

“Uh... Yumechi’s right, Ranran. It’s unhygienic to change in there!”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yep! Totally! Fortunately, we’re just girls here, so you can just quickly change in front of us. ‘Kay?!”

Two people telling her the same thing was much more convincing, it seemed. Though Asuhain-san seemed to be at a loss, she reluctantly agreed. “All right...” she said, unfastening the buttons on her blazer. Aso-senpai walked up to me, using the opportunity created by Asuhain-san’s focus shifting to her clothes.

“What’s going on in there?” Aso-senpai asked covertly.

“The president’s going on the offensive.”

“Wow. Can’t she do that at home and not here? That stupid hornball of a prodigy.”

So true. It can be problematic if you’re too impulsive.

“We might have done a good job hiding the issue, but we gotta make sure she doesn’t change anywhere near the documents room while Joe-kun’s in there.”

“Absolutely. We have to keep her focus elsewhere.” Asuhain-san would most likely foam at the mouth and faint if she saw President Kurenai in such a compromising position.

“Okay, leave this to your master.” Aso-senpai gave me a thumbs-up. She sounded so dependable. “Hey, Ranran,” she said, walking up to her as she changed. “You might not wear makeup, but you’ve got on a pretty cute bra.”

“My mom bought this for me. It’d be a waste if I didn’t wear it.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re trying to seduce me! Sorry! I’m not into girls like that!”

“Are you listening to me?! Also, what do you mean?! You certainly act like you are!”

Okay, so far so good. As long as Aso-senpai keeps this routine up, Asuhain-san will most likely forget all about the documents room. She’ll no doubt finish changing any minute now. Then, we just need her to leave to wash her blouse, and then President Kurenai and Haba-senpai can come out of the—

Then there was a click of the door opening, but it wasn’t from the documents room—it was the entrance.

“Hey, how’s it going?” It was Hoshibe-senpai.

“Eek!” Asuhain-san screamed.

In that same instant, Aso-senpai ran over to the entrance with inhuman speed. “Senpai!” she sang sweetly, completely contrary to the frantic dash she’d just done. “There you are!”

“Huh? Did you need something from me, Aso?”

“Nope. I just missed you a lot. You don’t have any plans, right, Senpai? Let’s go on a date around the school! Yeah?”

“You crazy? Don’t you have work to—”

“Let’s. Go.”

The door slammed behind them, and I could hear Hoshibe-senpai complaining while Aso-senpai continued to speak in the same cutesy tone, their voices fading into the distance. *Wow. She’s really earned her title of “Master.” I can’t believe she did all of that so quickly. Couldn’t she have just told him that Asuhain-san’s changing, though?*

“All of you are so all over the place...” Asuhain-san mumbled, still not fully dressed.

I couldn’t agree more. Also, the bra that’s supporting Asuhain-san’s melons has a very intricate pattern. It’s really cute.

The Sports Festival Is Just an Event Where You Sign Up for the Ball-Toss Game or Whatever and Call It a Day

Mizuto Irido

“We as participants pledge to...”

During this comfortable patch of weather in the middle of October, we’d finally begun the sports festival. This was an event where all the students forged strong bonds with each other while working up a sweat—an event of our high school years where we’d learn all about fairness of sportsmanship and teamwork. Or at least, that’s how it was explained to us.

After we listened to the speech at the opening ceremony, I moved

to a corner of the tennis court next to the school courtyard.

“Oh, Mizuto-kun. There you are!”

“What up, Irido?”

Sitting on the bench set up next to the tall nets were Isana Higashira and Kogure Kawanami, who were in full relaxation mode.

“You guys sure got here fast,” I said as I walked over. “I had a lotta trouble navigating the crowd.”

“It’s easy if you pretend you’re going to the bathroom.”

“It’s simple when you lack any presence to begin with.”

Isana patted the space on the bench between her and Kawanami, signaling me to sit down. It was by no means a comfortable bench, but it definitely beat sitting on the ground.

“Participants in the first event, the hundred-meter dash, should proceed...”

I could hear the PA in the distance. Most likely, the students who’d been waiting in their courtyard seats were clamoring to get to their respective areas. None of that commotion reached out here, though. It was almost as if we were in a different world entirely.

“Nice, isn’t it? They don’t use the tennis court during the sports festival. No chance we’ll be found by the teachers here either. It’s our little hideaway.”

“I shall praise you just for today, you promiscuous boy, for providing a place for my secret tryst with Mizuto-kun. Well done.”

“Shaddup! I never invited you! I told *him* about it because I thought he could use a getaway from the sports festival!”

“Yes, yes. I understand. You’re a tsundere.”

“God! Shut up!”

I’d gotten accustomed to their squabbles, so I tuned them out with ease. In the meantime, I brought out a book that I’d put a black cover on.

“What event did you enter, Mizuto-kun?” Isana asked, pressing her shoulder against mine as if to annoy Kawanami even more.

“The ball-toss game,” I responded as I flipped pages.

“Just that?”

“Just that.”

“I only signed up for the tug-of-war event!”

“What’re you getting excited for?” Kawanami scoffed. “Can you even hold on to the rope with those flabby arms? Maybe wait until you actually have muscle before trying to talk?”

“What was I to do?! The options afforded to me are very limited in my case!”

“Huh? Why?”

“You wouldn’t understand... But *you* do, don’t you, Mizuto-kun?” Isana’s face brightened, and she scooted closer to me.

I moved a little away from her because her boobs, which were supported by her jacket, came dangerously close to touching my elbow.

“After all, you are fully aware, aren’t you? You’re the only one who understands that *these* are much flabbier than my arms,” Isana whispered into my ear.

“I can *hear* you! Stop trying to seduce Irido, idiot!”

I’m so glad you’re here, Kawanami. It saves me the time of having to say these things myself. Isana had most likely decided not to participate in any of the running or jumping events because it’d hurt for her boobs to be moving all over the place. What a serious pain for girls to have to deal with.

“What will you be participating in? I will keep Mizuto-kun company while you do your promiscuous business elsewhere, so please don’t feel obligated to remain here.”

“Y’know what? I just decided that I’m gonna skip everything so I can stay here and keep an eye on you.”

“Minami-san’s gonna be on the hunt for you,” I added. “I don’t want her finding us too.”

“Indeed! No matter how frivolous a guy you may be, you can’t skip out on these events.”

“I *really* don’t want to hear this from *you* of all people!”

I got the feeling that the sports festival would end without incident. It’d be nice if the people on either side of me would calm down a little, though.

Further Understanding

Yume Irido

It was now afternoon, and so far the festival had proceeded without any problems.

“Heya, Yume-chan! Got a sec?” Akatsuki-san called out to me, entering the organizers’ tent as I bustled around. She was allowed inside, not only because we were friends, but also because she was the designated point of contact between the cheer squad and the student council.

“Oh, yeah. I’m okay. What’s up?”

“Someone forgot their uniform. Are there any extras?”

“No worries. We expected that and prepared some spares. Hm...I think they’re in a box in the sewing room.”

“Thanks!”

Now that I’d gotten her request squared away, I decided to ask her a question of my own. “How’s our class looking?”

“Mm... About what you’d expect, I guess. The people who are hyped up are hyped up, and the people who aren’t, aren’t. But that’s just how sports festivals go.”

“True...” If I wasn’t a student council member, I definitely would’ve been one of the people who wasn’t hyped. “I’m guessing Mizuto’s not enjoying himself.”

“Well, about that... I don’t know where he or Kawanami are. I thought maybe they’d be hanging out with Higashira-san around her class, but I didn’t see them there. The three of them are probably slacking off somewhere.”

That’s certainly a strange trio. But then again, I feel like I’ve seen them together every now and then recently. Although, it didn’t really make sense that Kawanami-kun and Higashira-san would intentionally spend time together when they didn’t get along whatsoever.

“Hm...” I thought for a little. “I guess that’s okay. It’s better than them being bored out of their minds with nothing to do.”

It wasn’t right to force people to interact with others when they weren’t interested in doing so. Mizuto and the others had their own way of going through the event. We had no right to really unilaterally decide that they were wrong for that.

Akatsuki-san tilted her head, not looking totally satisfied with my answer. “Well, if that is the decree of the great student council, I have no choice but to abide.”

“Don’t say it like that!”

“Ha ha! Lemme know if they don’t show up to the events they’re registered for. I’ll catch ’em in a jiffy for you!”

I bet she can. I was pretty sure she should’ve participated in an event already, but she didn’t let it show at all. If she was tired, she hid it well. *She was like Minamoto no Yoshitsune incarnate during the obstacle race.*

“Irido-san, I need yo— Ah.” Asuhain-san jogged in and froze as soon as she saw Akatsuki-san.

In contrast, as soon as Asuhain-san entered, Akatsuki-san’s eyes went straight for the protrusions on her chest, which were puffing out her jacket.

“Hm. So you’re wearing a sports bra today?”

“H-How can you tell?!”

“Of course you are. It’s the sports festival...” I said to Asuhain-san, who was fully red in the face, while lightly chopping Akatsuki-san on the head.

The Girl Friend Who Doesn’t Stop Growing

Mizuto Irido

“A’ight gang, I’ll be back,” Kawanami said before slowly jogging away to get to his event, leaving me and Isana by ourselves in the corner of the tennis court.

I continued reading while Isana played a game on her phone. Occasionally, she’d start talking as if she’d remembered something she’d forgotten to say.

“Hey, Mizuto-kun?”

“Yeah?”

“Games have recently been trying to decrease the skin exposure of their female characters in order to lower the age ratings.”

“Uh-huh.”

“To do that, they have them wear stockings. Thoughts?”

“Uh... What kind of reaction are you looking to get from me?”

“Well, wouldn’t you agree that it actually makes them even *more* lascivious?”

“Oh, so you want me to agree with you? Well, I can’t, because I don’t.”

“What?! You truly believe that bare legs are *more* perverse?! Does that mean that when you remove my socks, you’re secretly getting turned on?!”

“You’re muddying things. Look, there’s a certain person around me who loves to wear stockings and tights. That’s why even with a gun to my head, I wouldn’t admit having any kind of sexual attraction to that.”

“Hm? Oh... Now that I think about it, Yume-san has almost exclusively worn tights since I met her.”

“Apparently she’s not a fan of showing her bare legs. That being said, she totally does in the summer.”

“So that must mean that she’s returned to wearing them! Meaning, since the last time I saw her, she’s been... Heh heh heh.”

“Tone down your inner lecherous old man. You’re being gross.”

“I don’t particularly see a problem with viewing Yume-san’s legs in a sexual manner. Is that not what it means to like someone romantically?”

“No.”

“Have you truly not viewed Yume-san sexually?”

“I...want to keep my feelings for her separate from lust.”

“The male heart is quite complicated. My feelings, on the other hand, are all jumbled up.”

“I can’t act on every last one of my instincts like you do.”

“In that case, perhaps if I begin wearing stockings, you’ll begin to truly view me in a sexual manner.”

“Our friendship’ll be over if that ever happens.”

“Hm... I believe it would be healthier if we’re open about these

things, though.”

“Actually, what’s even the difference between tights and stockings?”

“The denier is different.”

“What’s that?”

“Simply put, the thickness of the material. Tights are thicker than stockings.”

“I see... So the darker colored ones are tights.”

“Which do you prefer? I’m partial to stockings, myself!”

“Hm... I guess tights.”

“*Really?* Is *that* right?”

“Stop grinning like an idiot. There’s no hidden meaning, so stop making assumptions.”

“I haven’t said anything, though.”

This was how we spent our time during the sports festival—having these kinds of conversations with the commotion and announcements from the sports festival as background noise. After a bit, it sounded like one of the events ended, because we heard an announcement, calling the next participants.

“All participants in the girls’ tug-of-war...”

Hearing this, I lightly nudged Isana’s side with my elbow. “Hey, tug-of-war. You’re up.”

“Huh? Oh! That’s right!” *I knew it. She forgot. That was close.* She exhaled. “How bothersome... Well, I suppose I’ll get it over with quickly enough.” She tried to puff out her chest, stretching her back, but then there was a snap. Something had broken.

“Are...you okay?” I asked, noticing that she froze. “What was that noise?”

“Oh, uh... Well...” Isana looked worried as she slowly put her hands around the middle area of her chest. Her face began to gradually turn pale. “Something, uh...broke.”

“Huh? What did?”

“My bra’s hook.”

Huh? Hook? Like, the thing that keeps everything together? “Did it break...just now?”

“Indeed... It occurred when I puffed out my chest.”

Is she holding both of the cups in order to keep the bra from falling off? “I don’t really know too much about all this, but are you just wearing your usual bra? Aren’t there ones designed for sports?”

“I-I put on my usual one out of habit. Ultimately, I deemed it too much work to search for my sports bra, so I decided this would suffice! I believed I’d be okay because the only event I signed up for was tug-of-war!”

How is she so unprepared? Also, she really had horrible timing. Of

all the times it could've broken, it broke *now*?

Isana hunched over and shut her eyes. "I cannot believe this! Everything has been going so well recently, so I completely let my guard down."

"Do bras usually break?"

"It's happened to me occasionally ever since middle school. I frequently had to equip myself with larger sizes." *Ah... I see. Wait... Does that mean that she changed sizes...again?* "I was fine at the beginning of the year! I blame you, Mizuto-kun!"

"Huh? Why?"

"You stimulated my female hormones! You rubbed them not too long ago!"

"Strictly speaking, I didn't rub them... But...did your size really change?"

Isana fell silent and looked down at her cleavage. "I've been thinking that it's a little tighter than usual."

"Ah. I see... Well, you're still just a first-year. This is...normal."

"It's your fault," she said, shooting me an accusing look.

"You...lewded me."

She phrased that so weirdly that it caught me off guard. *Lewded? Is that a joke on double Ds?* "You pronounced that wrong on purpose, didn't you?"

"Yes, for the double meaning," she said, giggling embarrassedly while groping herself as if to check the size of her chest. "Well, if I were to buy one with adjustable straps, I believe I might fit into a G-cup... Do you think it'd be safer to ask my mother to buy me a new one?"

"Don't ask me."

"What kind do you think I should get?"

"Like I said, don't ask me."

She's playing with me. I was a hundred percent confident about that, if not more. I looked away from her. "In any case, you should figure something out, or you'll be late."

"Mm... I suppose I have no choice. I have no time to fix it, so for now, I'll just have to..." She began rummaging underneath her shirt and in the next moment, she pulled out a light pink bra from the collar of her jacket.



“What are you doing?!”

“Could you hold on to this for me?” she asked, dropping it in my lap.

I stared at it in disbelief. It still had the warmth from her body on it. “N-No, wait. I can’t—”

“I’ll be honest—this is plenty embarrassing for me as well,” she said, slightly flushed, while staring right at me. “However, I prefer this to the alternative situation in which it falls off in the middle of the tug-of-war! I’ll be *right* back! Please keep it hidden underneath your jacket! Thank you!”

The jacket helped cover her body’s lines, so nobody would think that she wasn’t wearing a bra. Since there was no running or jumping involved in the tug-of-war, she was most likely right that nobody would find out. But then there was I, who knew the truth...

“I’ll be back...” Isana said, determined.

I had no words. All I could do was watch as she walked away, leaving me with guilt and the torment of having this bra, with cups as big as my palms, still warm from the heat of her body. As bad as I felt about it, I had no other choice but to hide it under my clothes.

I Can Only Deal with Femme Fatales When I Have the Mental Leisure To

“The women’s tug-of-war is now starting! You won’t wanna miss this deathmatch!”

I looked into the center of the school courtyard as an overly excited announcement played over the PA. There were three ropes on the ground and tape in the center; Isana was holding the second one with both hands. The girls holding the same rope appeared to be arranged by height, so Isana was in the middle. It was a fortunate position for her—she wouldn’t stand out too much.

As I watched my best friend, I couldn’t help but remember that her bra was being warmed in my pocket, which made me feel like Nobunaga Oda’s sandal retainer. At the sound of the starting pistol, the ropes immediately went taut, and both sides began yelling. From where I was standing, they seemed to be evenly matched in strength.

It didn’t seem like Isana was slacking off. Her face was red from pulling the rope with everything she had. She seemed a little anxious, but I was sure she’d be okay. *Looks like all’s good with her. I doubt anyone’ll notice that she doesn’t have a bra on.* Even I couldn’t tell, and I knew about it.

After less than a minute of back-and-forth, the other side yanked the rope towards them. Isana’s team immediately lost their balance

and fell to the ground.

“Ah...”

Isana fell forward, hard. Though her teammates had suffered the same fate, since I knew her situation, I was acutely aware of how bad it was for her to have fallen like that. Her chest squished against the ground and scraped against it. *Is she...okay?*

She'd lost two things being braless. The first was the support it would've given her. Without a bra, her breasts were prone to jiggling. The second was protection. Without that extra layer of clothing, she was much more vulnerable.

Her teammates groaned in pain, but Isana, on the verge of tears, remained completely silent and covered her chest with both arms. I felt bad for her, but she had nobody but herself to blame for coming so unprepared. *I guess I'll go comfort her. I wanna get rid of this thing in my pocket as soon as possible anyway.* Just as I began to make my way towards her, I heard a familiar voice call out to me.

“Huh? Mizuto?” My mind went blank for a second and I broke out into a cold sweat. “What are you doing here?” Yume Irido jogged up to me, blissfully unaware of the situation.

Yume, who was part of the sports festival organization committee, wore a band on her upper arm to prove as such. So it made sense that she was out here, because she had to always be on the move. *I can't believe I was so careless!*

“O-Oh. Hey...”

I couldn't just run away, so my only option was to respond. Yume slightly tilted her head while stopping almost within arm's reach. It took everything in me to stop myself from retreating.

“Nobody in our class has seen you around. Where have you been slacking off?”

“Wh-What's it matter to you? I don't have to tell the establishment anything.”

“The ‘establishment’?” Yume giggled. *That's nice and all, but this really isn't the time to be having a leisurely conversation! You're busy, aren't you?! Get a move on, already!*

“Okay then, Mr. Rebel, if you don't have any interest in the sports festival, what business do you have here?”

“I-I just kinda felt like goin' for a walk...”

“Oh, let me guess...” Yume grinned, peering up at me. “You wanted to see me?”

Aagh! I do not have time to play along with your femme fatale antics right now! “No! That's not it at all! I did *not* want to see you at all!”

“Huh?”

“A-Anyway, I'm in the middle of something. Bye!”

“H-Hey, wai—”

I forcefully ended the conversation and fled the scene. *Goddamnit, Isana! You owe me big time for this!!!*

My Defense Isn't as Strong as My Offense

Yume Irido

“Yumechi! Let's eat lun— Whoa!”

As we entered the lunch break, Aso-senpai, who'd come into the organizer's tent, barked like a walrus when she saw my face.

I slowly looked up at her and asked, “What's...the matter?”

“That's what *I* want to know! Are you okay? You're giving off 'I lost everything at horse racing' vibes.”

“No, I'm okay... It's just that...even now, after everything... Aha ha ha...” Aso-senpai shook me by the shoulders. *It's okay... Don't waste your energy on me. I'm so worthless.*

“Something serious must've happened,” President Kurenai said from behind Aso-senpai. “Aisa, this reminds me of that one time when you failed to ask Hoshibe-senpai out.”

“Why are you so casually bringing up my trauma?!”

“It's your fault for trying to act like a femme fatale and beat around the bush rather than be direct. I gotta say, it *was* pretty amusing, though.”

“Your personality is really nasty, you stupid prodigy!”

Acting like a femme fatale... Beating around the bush... “You're completely right, President Kurenai.”

“Yumechi?!” Aso-senpai exclaimed.

“It's like pretending to be a tsundere—doing it in real life just turns people off. Acting like a femme fatale and getting a big head time and time again isn't the right move at all...”

“H-Huh, Yumechi?! You're killing me over here! Stop! I'm in way too deep!!!”

The Person I Like Values Themselves Too Little

After some time, I regained my composure, and we left for lunch while continuing our conversation.

“You're in a mood because you're hungry, Yumechi! You gotta eat!” Aso-senpai urged.

“You think so?”

“Totally! I always overthink things when I get hungry. You too, right, Suzurin?”

“No,” President Kurenai calmly said. “Can't say I do.”

“Ah, c'mon, Suzurin! Play along!” Aso-senpai then began

rummaging around in her bag. “Did you two bring lunch? I made mine today, so— Ah.” She pulled out a handkerchief wrapped around not one but two large lunch boxes, obviously intended for two people. “U-Uh...” She made a difficult face while glancing at me. “Y-Yumechi... I’m sorry. It’s really hard to say this with how the conversation’s progressed, but...” she clutched one of the boxes to her chest. “Is it... Is it okay if I go deliver this to Senpai?”

It felt like the wind was knocked out of me. “I’m so glad that things are going well for you... Totally.”

“Your eyes look dead!”

It’s too bright... The twinkle of the bittersweet teenage life is too bright... How strange. Am I not a teenager? Why is she radiating so much more innocence than I when I’m the younger one?

President Kurenai chuckled in amusement. “This is good timing. Let’s take this opportunity to go to the student council room. We’ll be able to watch Aisa’s cringey moves in action while also escaping the outdoor dust.”

“Who’re you calling cringey?! Take a look in the mirror!”

President Kurenai ignored Aso-senpai and exited the tent, so we followed her.

“President Kurenai... You don’t have anything?” I asked, walking next to her.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I mean... For Haba-senpai.”

In the next moment, the honor student and president of the student council, Suzuri Kurenai, pouted like a child.

“I did, but...he ran away...”

“Huh?”

“He went on about how eating lunch with him would lower public opinion of me. Isn’t that awful?!”

“Wow... Joe-kun’s perception of himself is the pits,” Aso-senpai said exasperatedly.

President Kurenai quickened her pace. “It’s not as simple as that. It’s a disease. The more he puts himself down, the more he rejects my decision to have him by my side—and he doesn’t even realize that!”

“Yeah, that’s really infuriating... But looking at it another way, isn’t it kind of nice that you’re the only one who knows just how exceptional he is? Makes you feel kinda special, doesn’t it?”

President Kurenai, still pouting, flashed me a look. “Yume-kun... You’re like the devil on my shoulder.”

“Huh?! A-Am I?”

“So you not only want him all to yourself, but you want to brag to everyone about how amazing he is?” Aso-senpai sneered. “Aren’t you a little *too* greedy, Suzurin?”

“Shut it.” President Kurenai looked away, pretending to move her hair out of her face, but really using that opportunity to hide her flushed ears. “I’m just a little smarter than the average person, but otherwise...I’m a normal girl.”

“And that’s exactly what Joe-kun thinks too, right?”

“Oh my god, shut up!”

“Ow! Ow!” Aso-senpai screamed out as President Kurenai stepped on her foot.

It was pure violence, unbecoming of a lauded prodigy like her. I couldn’t help but giggle.

The Result of Going Too Hard at a Tender Spot

“Senpai!” Aso-senpai said in a sweet voice. “Your Aisa Eats is here!”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“You really like to work your underclassmen hard, Senpai. It was a lot of work to get up early to make all of this, you know?”

“*You’re* the one who said you’d make it. But...thanks. I mean it. You’re a good cook.”

“Well, yeah, I guess compared to you I—”

“It’s so good that I wanna eat it every day.”

“Hnngh!”

“Ah, wait. But if that happened, I’d have to deal with your annoying antics on the daily. Yeah, never mind. Let’s keep it as an ‘every now and then’ deal.”

“Ah— Hnngh! I-I’ll be back to get the box from you later! Bye!” Aso-senpai, red in the face, retreated from Hoshibe-senpai’s class’s area.

“Why doesn’t he ever get fed up with her advances?” I asked President Kurenai as we both watched Aso-senpai from afar.

“He’s just like that.”

“True enough...”

His unconscious retort was enough indication of his obliviousness. He only marched to the beat of his own drum. He’d never be swallowed up by Aso-senpai’s pace.

Looking at it from the outside, there were really only two ways to react to her advances—either misinterpret them or distance yourself. Aso-senpai was unsurprisingly the type of girl that others hated, judging by how the female students in Hoshibe-senpai’s class seemed to flash her disdainful looks.

Aso-senpai returned to where we were and puffed out her chest, a prideful look on her reddened face.

“Did you see that, Yumechi? Did you see your master in all her

glory?"

"Yes. You have it rough too, don't you, Senpai?"

"Oh? What's this, I sense? Are you looking down on me, my dear apprentice?"

"I think you deserve a gold star for not reacting to him complimenting your food."

"Don't rate me!"

Since Aso-senpai had completed her objective, we decided to move on to the student council room. We left the school courtyard to go back towards the school building when something caught our eyes.

"Oh?" President Kurenai was the first to see the two of them.

I knew the back of one of them all too well. It was my little stepbrother and ex, Mizuto Irido. The other was his best friend—a friend of mine too—Isana Higashira. Her jacket was covered with dirt, most likely due to the tug-of-war she'd just participated in. That wasn't what bothered me; getting dirt on your jacket after such an event was as natural as novels getting digital releases. However, there was one thing that was strange. She seemed a little unsteady.

"I'm still tingling..." Higashira-san said, groaning.

"Yeah, you worked yourself pretty hard. Wanna go to the nurse's office?"

"I-I think that may be a little too much for me to handle," she said, curling her back as if to support her chest. Her feet were also turned inwards for some reason. Also, I noticed that her body would occasionally tremble.

"Nnn!"

"What's the matter?" Mizuto asked.

"I-I may have become slightly tender...from all the rubbing."

"Huh? O-Oh... I see."

Uh... What's this atmosphere around them? They've got some sort of awkward tension, but he also seems concerned for her. As my emotions cooled down, Aso-senpai made a sound as if she'd suddenly understood something.

"They...totally did it."

President Kurenai nodded. "They are one hundred percent participating in aftercare."

Suddenly, a sense of desperation burst from deep inside me, and I began waving my hands for no reason.

"U-Uh, b-but during the sports festival?! N-No way, right?"

"During the sports festival, everyone is congregated in a central location, more or less. It's the perfect opportunity."

"Ugh, talk about horndogs. I bet they think they got away without anyone noticing, but they can't fool us."

"She's talking all about how she's 'tingling.'"

“Yeah, and how she’s tender.”

“B-But you never know! Maybe she just fell over during the tug-of-war, which caused her nipples to rub against the ground really hard, and *that’s* why she’s tender there!”

“What world are you living in that she wouldn’t be wearing a bra?” Aso-senpai scoffed.

President Kurenai shook her head. “You really think that a girl who would purposely not wear a bra during the physically strenuous sports festival exists? You’re crazy.”

All I could do was groan. I... I had no rebuttal, despite knowing how things were between Higashira-san and Mizuto. There was a ninety-nine percent chance that this was all a big misunderstanding!

“Well, I guess you’re too young to really know about this stuff.”

“One day you’ll know all the ins and outs of relations between a man and a woman, Yume-kun.”

I paused before muttering under my breath, “All this, coming from people who haven’t even kissed a guy before.”

“Huh?!” they both screamed at me. *I almost picked a fight with them.*

Logic Conquers All

“When did I ever say I haven’t kissed anyone?!” Aso-senpai exclaimed. “Sure...I haven’t kissed Senpai yet, but...I’ve never said I haven’t kissed *anyone!*”

“This is what’s called a logical fallacy,” President Kurenai explained. “You assumed that since neither of us is in a relationship, we’ve never kissed anyone. Words are your lifeblood as secretary, so you should be more careful with them.”

“Uh-huh. So sorry.”

The two of them spit excuse after excuse until we finally reached the student council room. *Has it always been such a long walk? Why do I feel so tired? All we’ve done is walk over here for lunch.*

“Oh, now that I think about it, where’s Asuhain-san?” I asked.

“Isn’t she eating with her classmates?” Aso-senpai replied.

“Should I invite her?”

“I’m not sure she’d enjoy our conversation topics...”

She had a point. We were about to discuss romance. There was no way that Asuhain-san, as staunch a hater of romance as she was, would enjoy herself. We also didn’t want to out President Kurenai’s crush on Haba-senpai.

“Well, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to reach ou—” Just as Aso-senpai opened the door to the student council room, we saw Asuhain-san sitting at the meeting desk, her lunch box open.

“Ah,” Asuhain-san said, turning around, dropping the rolled omelet that she’d been holding with her chopsticks.

“Ah,” I said, noticing her.

The lights in the room hadn’t even been on. She’d been sitting in this dark room with nothing but the rays of sun illuminating her small frame as she ate her lunch.

President Kurenai peeked inside the room and noticed Asuhain-san. “Oh, there you are. Perfect timing.”

Huh? Is she not picking up on how awkward a situation we’ve walked into? She flipped on the lights and walked into the room.

“We’re just about to have lunch too. Is it okay if we join?”

“Uh... Yes. Of course...” Asuhain-san awkwardly replied.

Aso-senpai and I leaned towards each other and began whispering.

“Does she have any friends in her class?”

“I-I have no clue... I don’t know much about her class.”

I’d assumed that she only avoided guys but had no issue chatting with girls. If she’d gone through the trouble of leaving the lights off, though, wouldn’t that mean she was trying to hide? Maybe she was different from Mizuto and Higashira-san, who weren’t really a part of their classes because they were always off doing their own thing. Maybe she was just a loner at heart. I saw my past self in her, making my chest hurt.

Not knowing what else to do, Aso-senpai and I entered as well and sat in our usual seats. Surprisingly enough, President Kurenai didn’t take her usual seat at the head of the table, but on the other side of the table, diagonal from me, right next to Asuhain-san and across from Aso-senpai.

She put her lunch box on the table. “You’re in class six, right?” she asked Asuhain-san. “How’re things going?”

“Yes, I am. Things are...okay.”

Why are you asking about her class?! I felt like I’d said this before, but...President Kurenai really didn’t understand people. If only Haba-senpai had been here!

“Uh... More importantly,” Aso-senpai said energetically, trying to change the atmosphere. “You had something you wanted to ask for advice about, right, Yumechi?! That’s why we’re all here!”

“O-Oh. Right.” *You’re not wrong, but why did you have to deflect to me?!*

Asuhain-san looked at me calmly. “You don’t have to worry about me. Pretend I’m not even here.”

Urgh... This is so sad! That’s the line of someone who’s always in the corner when the rest of the group is having fun.

“W-Well, since you’re here, I think it’d be nice if I could get your

opinion too, Asuhain-san,” I said, trying to include her.

She exhaled. “I’m not sure how helpful I’ll be...”

I’m not gonna back down! You’re a fellow student council member! I’m gonna drag you into this conversation kicking and screaming! If she gets angry at me like Mizuto did back then...well, I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.

I took a moment to organize my thoughts before speaking again. “Well, I have this friend...”

“Pfft!” Aso-senpai tried to stifle a laugh.

Yes, I know! I’m talking about myself! Leave me alone! Fortunately, Asuhain-san didn’t seem suspicious at all, so I began talking about what had happened with Mizuto earlier when I’d run into him—about how I’d tried to tease him and not only had I gotten firmly shot down, but he’d also run away from me.

“Things have been getting better between them recently...or so I’ve heard, but now this happened, and I—I mean, my *friend* is apparently not sure what to do.”

Aso-senpai let out a pensive groan. “Maybe there’s something else at play. Maybe he had something urgent come up?”

“Maybe?”

“Hm,” President Kurenai snorted. “He must be quite dense if that kind of forward approach doesn’t work. For a guy like that, the best thing to do is try, try, and try again until it gets through his thick skull.”

“You think so?”

If anything, I would say that Mizuto tended to be pretty perceptive, but also there had been a lot of misunderstandings in recent times. Breaking past those might have required me to keep up the attack. But seeing two real-life examples of people who had been trying to persistently break through to their crushes for an entire year worried me.

And then finally, Asuhain-san tilted her head in confusion. “Um... In the first place, isn’t it rude to tease others?” Our bodies froze like statues. “All your friend is doing is ignoring his boundaries and forcing her desires onto him. Sorry if this sounds mean, but maybe your friend has no common sense?” Cracks formed in our bodies. “If she’s fond of him, then it’s even more befuddling why she feels the need to try and assert her dominance. I think that will most certainly result in him hating her.” Our hearts broke.

“‘Rude’...”

“‘No common sense’...”

“‘Hating’...”

Is that it? Is that how it is? Did I make him hate me?

“Uh, did I say something wrong?” Asuhain-san tilted her head in

confusion.

No, you didn't... You're completely right. It was logical—extremely logical. So logical, in fact, that my heart couldn't take it.

"Hm." The first one to recover from the knockout punch of Asuhain-san's logic was President Kurenai. *I knew I could count on her.* "That's a very coolheaded, logical opinion. It's a very on-brand way of thinking for you, Ran-kun."

"Th-Thank you very much."

"You should treasure that. You should never, uh... Never let your objective viewpoint, um... Never let it be swayed by temporary feelings."

You sound so uncertain! Your own words are hurting you!

Asuhain-san, though, was practically beaming after getting a compliment from the person she looked up to so much. "Thank you! I will stick to my guns no matter what others say and swear to never do anything that would besmirch the honor of the student council!"

"Urk..." The student council president, who'd done something that would besmirch the honor of the student council in the documents room, silently died on the inside.

"B-By the way..." I mustered all the courage inside me, suppressing the damage I'd taken, to ask Asuhain-san something. "In your opinion... What should my friend have done?"

"Hm? Well, romance doesn't really interest me, so my answer might be generic, but..."

"Uh-huh..."

"Wouldn't it be best if she was just honest about what's on her mind?"

There was a bang as Aso-senpai dropped her head to the table. I could almost hear her screaming about how she would've done that if it was that easy.

"I'll...tell her that."

"I-I'm aware how hard that is, but...she can't just keep him in the dark forever. Every now and then, she should be clear with her words and actions...or at least, that's what I think."

"Every now and then," huh? She had a point. It was wrong to just tease him forever.

"Sorry if I'm being presumptuous," Asuhain-san said softly, hanging her head.

"Huh? No, you're not—"

"I know I'm not very convincing. I just used my own, personal logic, so you can just forget I said anything." With that, she went back to focusing on her lunch.

The way she ended things and turned to focus on something else really reminded me of how Higashira-san used to be not too long ago.

Where Nobody Can See

Mizuto Irido

I escorted Isana back to the tennis court like a bodyguard as I tried to protect her from unsuspecting gazes after she'd hurt her nipples in her big fall. As we got closer, I saw that there was an uninvited guest there in addition to Kawanami.

"Oh, finally. There you two are!"

Akatsuki Minami, who was wearing a skirt underneath the cheer squad's black coat, was literally dragging Kogure Kawanami around by his collar.

"Minami-san..." I glanced at her and Kawanami. "What's up with your outfit?"

"I'm part of the cheer squad! Jeez, you should know *that* much! Are you *that* uninterested in your classmates?!"

"Oh, right..." *Now that she mentions it, there's a cheerleading competition before the afternoon portion of the festival begins.*

"I was waiting for you two! Yume-chan's running around with the student council and—" Minami-san paused to stare at Isana, who was hiding behind me. "Why are you bent over, Higashira-san?"

"Ah! O-Oh. This is simply how I've always been! Pay me no heed!"

"Oh, heed I will pay!"

Isana, seeing Minami-san lock onto her, shrunk behind me even more. She'd been hunching over because it apparently helped prevent her nipples from rubbing against her clothes too much. I'd already given her broken bra back a while ago, and she'd put it with her things in her classroom. But if this was how it was gonna be, it might've been better to just wear it even if it was broken.

"Well, whatever. You two haven't had lunch yet, right? Since Yume-chan's not around, I was wonderin' if you'd wanna eat together."

"Sure, but can I ask something? What happened to Kawanami?" *It looks like you're dragging around a lifeless doll by the neck.*

"Oh, this guy? Don't worry. He's good. Don't mind him at all. He'll wake up eventually."

"Uh, so what happened to him?" I asked, reiterating my question.

"Don't worry. He's good!" *Chills! She really doesn't want to talk about this.* "Let's get going! I've got the cheer competition comin' up soon, so time's a wastin'!"

Minami-san dragged the lifeless Kawanami behind her as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I wasn't sure, but I could've sworn I saw some hives on Kawanami's wrists protruding from his jacket.

It's Hard to Tell the Difference between a Close Friendship and a Romantic Relationship

Since Yume was with the other student council members, I'd thought that the plan was for Minami-san to have lunch with me and Isana, but I was mistaken. I'd been completely off the mark.

"Ta-da! This is Isana Higashira-chan!"

"Whoa!"

"Whoa!!!"

Two girls were added to the equation. They were clapping, their eyes locked onto Isana's boobs. I recognized them; they usually hung out with Yume and Minami-san. One had a bob cut and a general spaced-out vibe, while the other was tall and gave off a sporty feel.

Isana tugged at my sleeve, her face filled with unease. "Wh-Who are these people? Why are they here?!" she whispered.

Someone like Isana, who was outgoing with people she knew but shy with everyone else, could only tremble like a lamb in a den of lions. *Jeez... I don't know what Minami-san is up to, but I guess I have to be the mediator here.*

"Uh..." I looked at the two of them and tilted my head.

"Oh, right." Minami-san clapped her hands together. "Nasuka Kanai's the one who looks like she's got zero motivation. The loud-looking one's Maki Sakamizu!"

"Huh?! You sayin' he doesn't know our names even though we're in the same class?! Also, what do you mean 'loud-looking one,' Akki?!"

"I don't take note of people I don't interact with either," said the spacey one. "Nice to meet ya. Pleasure knowin' ya."

"Huh?! Wait, am I in the minority?!"

This girl is just as Minami-san described—loud. The more lackadaisical one seems more in tune with me and Isana, though. I repeated their names in my head, trying to commit them to memory. *Okay, I'll remember them...at least for today.*

"Well, we can do away with the formalities," I said. "Why'd you call us over here? Just so you know, when it comes to meeting new people, this one here is a fish out of water, gasping for dear life."

"That's needlessly descriptive!" Minami-san remarked. "Well, like, it's kinda lonely without Yume-chan. And then I remembered that I hadn't introduced them to Higashira-san yet, so I figured I might as well use this opportunity to do just that."

"You should've asked her first."

"Oh, good point! Higashira-san, let's have lunch together, okay?" Minami-san said cheerfully, looking at Isana.

Isana's eyes flitted between Sakamizu and Kanai before she finally

mustered out a response. "Well... I suppose... It's okay..."

"She said, 'I'd love to!'" Minami-san very liberally interpreted Isana's words.

"Eek." That only made Isana shrink back more.

Good grief. I understood that Minami-san was only trying to lighten the atmosphere, but she really shouldn't have put words in Isana's mouth.

Minami-san dropped Kawanami to the ground, then pulled up two chairs and put them next to Sakamizu and Kanai.

"This one's for you, Higashira-san," Minami-san said as she sat in one of them. "I got permission."

"O-Okay," Isana said.

She sounded so helpless that I brought my own chair over too. While I did, Sakamizu and Kanai looked down at Kawanami's lifeless body.

"Poor thing."

"He looks like a dead fish."

I put my chair next to Isana's and sat down, which finally made her comfortable enough to follow suit.

Then I heard some murmurs from Sakamizu and Kanai.

"They're huge."

"They so are."

"They're jigglin'."

"They so are!"

"Watch it, you two," Minami-san interjected.

Well, Isana is currently bra-less. I'd have to make sure I stopped them if they tried to grope her. Seeing how tense she'd gotten, I decided to start up a conversation.

"Isana, did you bring lunch?"

"Oh, yes. I did. Huh? What else could this neatly wrapped box on my lap be?"

"Well, it's just that I can't imagine Natora-san making food."

"Apparently my father made my lunch today."

"Oh..." I hadn't met him yet, but they really seemed to work him hard. But then again, based on the impression I'd gotten from Natora-san, this could've just been how their housework was split.

"Was yours made by that kind woman?" Isana asked.

"Yeah. Yuni-san really went all out for today."

"Your stepmother is so kind. I'd like to request an exchange of mothers, in fact."

I refuse. I do not want Natora-san as my mom.

"Hm..."

"I see..."

Kanai and Sakamizu made noises while Minami-san grinned for

some strange reason.

“Well, my compatriots, what do you think?” Minami-san asked.

“It’s too early to say anything,” Kanai said.

“But they were talkin’ about their families, so they gotta be pretty close,” Sakamizu said.

What are they talking about? The three of them began muttering among themselves while opening their lunches. Minami-san had apparently bought bread from the convenience store while the remaining two had lunch boxes.

“Wait, Nasu-cchi, why are you even here?!” Sakamizu asked, opening an even bigger lunch box than all of ours. “Shouldn’t you be eatin’ with your upperclassman boyfriend? This isn’t the time to be ‘whale watching!’”

“Meh. I feel like Minami-chan needs me more after being rejected by Irido-chan.”

“Excuse me?! I wasn’t rejected!”

Hm, well, it’s true that Yume has less time to spend with Minami-san now that she’s on the student council. Honestly, though, I expected Minami-san to act a lot crazier than this, due to how she’d acted in the past.

Minami-san ripped open her bread’s packaging and chomped on it. “I’ve matured! I’m an adult who can genuinely celebrate her dear friend’s success!”

“Mm-hmm...”

“You matured so quickly. It was only a week ago that you came crying to me that you were so lonely,” Kanai said.

“Th-That’s what triggered my maturation!”

I wish you could’ve matured before you started high school. That would’ve saved me the trouble of your proposal and all that. I had a feeling that the reason she’d settled down a bit had been Kawanami, but also because she had other friends aside from Yume.

“Um... Mizuto-kun?” Isana brought me out of my thoughts. “Let us exchange food items. I am very much a fan of the Irido family fried chicken,” she said, eyeing my lunch box.

“Oh, right. Okay, open your mouth.”

“Ah...”

I picked up a piece of fried chicken with my chopsticks and brought it to her mouth. It was like feeding a baby bird.

“Mmm, so delicious!” Isana said, her cheeks puffing out like a chipmunk’s as she chewed.

“I’ll take one of these candied sweet potatoes then.”

“Mmff?!”

I swiped one of the potatoes from her lunch box and swiftly brought it to my mouth.

Isana quickly gulped down the chicken and grabbed me by my shoulders. "Pardon me?! Those are my favorite!"

"Yeah, I know."

"You did it on purpose?!"

"You took something I like, so I took something you like. Fair's fair, right?"

"It's common practice that you take what *you* like, not what the other person likes!"

"Yeah, but nothing's really catching my eye. Everything looks about the same to me."

To me, food was nothing more than sustenance. It didn't have any special meaning to me, and it had been like that for as long as I could remember.

Isana deeply frowned. "You're the type of person *nobody* would enjoy cooking for!"

"So what? Were you planning on cooking for me or something?"

"Hmph. No, I simply was remarking on how that's one less path to your heart."

"And what do said 'paths' matter to you at this point?"

"They matter a lot! I'm hard at work, day in and out, studying methods by which to entice you to dote on me more."

"It's nice to dream big, I guess..."

"Would you like me to draw you erotic images or something?"

"Why the hell would I want that?"

"If I can't win you over through your stomach, then I'll appeal to your lust!"

"Things'll get out of control if I don't do something now, so I'll dote on you a little. Here's another piece of chicken."

"Yay! Mmff!"

As I brought the second piece of chicken towards her mouth, I really was starting to understand how a mother bird felt. But also, it seemed that the three girls around us had begun talking among themselves again.

"Uh, they're *definitely* dating, right?" Sakamizu whispered.

"There was *absolutely* no hesitation when he fed her. Chills," Kanai muttered.

"Yeah, but they're just friends," Minami-san said.

"Lies! There's no friggin' way! They're definitely getting down and dirty on the weekends!"

"Irido-chan's gotta be walkin' on eggshells around them..."

Then, at that moment, Kawanami, who'd been as still as a corpse, suddenly sat up.

"Eek!" Isana cried, clinging to my shoulder.

Hey, you know you're not wearing a bra right now, right? As I tried to

move my shoulder away from the soft sensation encroaching on it, Kawanami looked around at the three girls, his hair covered in dirt.

"I...could've sworn I heard a *really* unpleasant conversation just now."

"Just your imagination. Here," Minami-san said in a terrifying voice, brushing off his claim while tossing the extra bread she'd been holding at him. "Lunch. I bought you some while I was at the convenience store. Show me some tears of gratitude!"

"Huh?!" Kawanami glared at the bread she'd tossed at him while wiping off the dirt from his hair. "I would've preferred curry bread."

"Knew you'd say that, so I bought that too. Here," she said, throwing him another unopened bun.

"Oh? Thanks!" Suddenly, his face relaxed.

Seeing this, Sakamizu and Kanai started talking among themselves once again.

"Wait, these two are definitely dating too."

"No, I think they're actually married."

"I *knew* I heard something really unpleasant," Kawanami said, grimacing.

"Yeah, you might've been right on the money with that," Minami-san agreed.

Sheesh, can these people just settle down and eat in peace?

"Eek! I-I'm so sorry! My nipples are still kinda..."

Yeah, I'm counting you among "these people" too, Isana.

What Are You, a Lurker?

Yume Irido

"Hm? Your little brother?"

"We just had lunch with him, but he went off somewhere."

"Yeah, him and Higashira-san! They're *totally* dating!"

"How many times are you gonna say that?"

After lunch, I returned to the classroom, but Mizuto wasn't there. I'd been surprised to hear that he and Higashira-san had had lunch with Maki-san and Nasuka-san, but apparently they'd been roped into it by Akatsuki-san.

"Look, I made friends with Higashira-chan," Nasuka-san said, holding out her phone.

Apparently, lunch had gone pretty well. Akatsuki-san had already left since she had the cheer competition. Kawanami-kun was gone too, but I assumed he was most likely with Mizuto and Higashira-san. *I kinda wanted to see Mizuto before getting back to work...*

As I headed back to the organizers' tent, the cheer competition

began.

“One! Two! Red Team!”

The guys and girls on the cheer squad yelled, matching the rhythm of the taiko drum. Among them, I saw Akatsuki-san. Despite how small she was, the impact of her bold, sharp movements really set her apart from the others. As I watched over her, I noticed someone watching her from a corner of the school courtyard.

“Hm? Kawanami-kun?” I called out to him.

“Ah...” Realizing that he’d been caught, Kawanami sheepishly looked back at me.

Did he not want people to see him watching over Akatsuki-san? I couldn’t help but smile. “She’s really kicking butt, don’t you think? She practiced really hard.”

“Hm... Well, looks like she worked pretty hard despite being a shrimp,” Kawanami-kun said, scratching his head as if to distract from how he really felt.

Neither of them is honest about their feelings. “Could you keep this to yourself, Irido-san? She’s gonna get so full of herself and be all like, ‘What are you, a lurker?’”

“Sure, you got it.” But then, inspiration struck me. “In exchange, could you tell me something?”

“Hm?”

“Where are Mizuto and Higashira-san?”

Kawanami-kun’s lips widened into a teasing grin. “Oh? You worried about them?”

“Well, uh... As a member of the student council, I need to make sure that students aren’t slacking off.”

“Heh, sure. Let’s go with that, but it’s no fun to just tell you outright. Hm...but I guess the cat’s already out of the bag, so it doesn’t matter,” Kawanami muttered to himself. “Corner of the tennis court.” He pointed towards the side of the school building. “Quiet and peaceful there, isn’t it?”

“Oh. Thanks...”

Ugh, this guy... He’s such an unsociable pain in the butt. I had work to do, but I decided to go check on him when I had a chance later.

My First Nipples

Mizuto Irido

When the afternoon portion of the sports festival began, Isana and I returned to the deserted tennis court. After all, she was braless, so it wasn’t like we could hang around populated areas.

She let out a sigh of relief. “I can finally relax.”

“Can you fix it somehow?”

“My bra? I’m not sure... Do you think it’d be possible for me to staple it together?”

“You really think *I* would know? Couldn’t you use tape or something?”

“Due to the lack of classes today, I don’t have any on my person...”

“Could you borrow some from a teacher?” Isana made a face at my suggestion. “*That* against the idea, huh?”

“Though I’m aware of how simple a matter it is to ask a teacher... I’d still prefer that to be an absolute last resort.”

“Nah, I get where you’re coming from.”

Relying on someone else was a last resort for people like us.

“I’ve no problem as long as you’re the only one around. However, *I will* say that not having the constriction of a bra is very pleasant. There’s no fear of my nipples showing either, so long as I continue wearing my jacket.”

“Can you not say that word?” I chopped her on the head.

“Ow! Heh heh heh.” She looked pleased for some reason. Then, she unzipped her jacket slightly and peeked inside. “I was quite surprised to find how thin the material for our gym uniforms is. My *you-know-whats* are poking out fairly obviously.”

“Why are you being so casual about this?”

“Take a gander at how visible they are.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“Heh heh, I’m joking. It sure is adorable how purehearted you are, Mizuto-kun!”

“Y’know... You’ve been kinda full of yourself recently.”

“Huh?”

“It’s great how confident you’ve become, but...maybe it’s time you learned a lesson, the hard way, about the hierarchy in this relationship.”

“Huh? Huh?! Wh-What are you doing with your fists?!”

Just as I was about to press both of my knuckles against Isana’s temples, we heard muffled voices from outside of the court.

“Are you sure nobody’s gonna come here?”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine!”

“Mmf!”

Isana and I looked at each other, stifling our breathing while turning to look behind us. Behind the net, in the shadows around where the emergency exit for the school building was, we saw a guy and girl we didn’t know embracing each other and...locking lips.

“Wah! Waaaah!” Isana’s breathing became ragged.

It seemed we weren’t the only ones who were skipping out on the

sports festival. Perhaps it was only natural that couples would get like this during such an event. While I calmly tried to reason this out, things became more intense.

“Ah! D-Don’t!”

“Sorry, I’ll be quick.”

“W-We stop immediately if anyone comes, okay?”

Then, the guy began pulling up the girl’s shirt. I froze at the sight of the fully exposed bra of a complete stranger.

“Huh? N-No way, right? Here?! M-Mizuto-kun!”

“Whoa!”

As the guy’s fingers slid underneath the girl’s bra, Isana leapt onto me, knocking me flat on the bench. That’s when I felt something soft squishing against my chest. Looking down, I saw Isana, whose gaze was fixed on me, and two swellings peeking out from the collar of her shirt. Then, there was one more thing I could feel through her jacket. In the middle of the two soft, water-balloon-like cushions were two, small, hard...

“You can’t...” Isana practically whispered. “Your first nipples must either be mine or Yume-san’s!”

Who said that I haven’t seen nipples before? But also, I guess she isn’t specifying looking. In that case...

“Pretty forward to be including yourself in that.”

“Ah. W-W-W-Well, o-of course, I-I will relinquish the right to Yume-san!”

Too little, too late, dumbass.

President Kurenai’s Treasure Hunt Prompt

Yume Irido

“Finally, it’s time for the highly anticipated Rakuro’s famous treasure hunt...with a twist!” the announcer called out.

Due to how busy I’d been with student council activities I’d only entered one event—just as Mizuto had—and now, it was finally time.

Honestly speaking, I wasn’t the athletic type. I was acutely aware that I wouldn’t be much help in competitions that required some sort of physical prowess, so I had signed up for the treasure hunt. Never in my wildest dreams had I expected to be drawing the same prompts that I’d helped to write.

As someone who knew exactly what had been written and how hard the initial prompts were, I felt extremely worried. *I should try not to be stubborn and immediately draw a new one if need be.*

I stood at the starting line with the other two participants, who were chatting with each other. They seemed even more anxious than

people who had been in the other events.

“Phew, I’m so nervous.”

“What should we do if it’s too hard?”

There were three desks in separate locations around the school courtyard; each had a box filled with prompts. At the signal, we were to run to the closest desk and draw a prompt, and if we wanted a new one, we’d have to run to a different desk. The new prompt would be easier, but the trade-off was that we’d lose time getting one.

The initial prompts were hard but not impossible to fulfill. Asuhain-san had told me not to write things like “handsome boy” or “cute girl,” explaining that it’d feel really bad for the person who had been picked if the judges said no. *Why didn’t I take her more seriously?!*

“On your marks!”

I began praying as I got in position. “Get set... Go!”

Unfortunately, I forgot that nothing good ever came out of praying.

The other participants and I ran to the box. They seemed to be just as unathletic as I, but none of us were slow to start. This was where the problems began, though. After reaching the desk last, I used my intuition to go for one of the boxes that the other two were going for and shoved my hand inside.

“All participants have reached the first prompts! What have they drawn?” the announcer yelled.

As I rummaged around in the box, the other two read their prompts and screamed in surprise.

“What the hell?!”

“Huh?! What? Really?!”

It felt like I was looking at my future self. Fearful, I felt a piece of paper get caught on my finger. *Fine! I’m going with this one! Please be okay!* I pulled out the paper and nervously opened it.

“Uh... Huh?”

I was dumbfounded. Despite being the one who’d helped write these, I was dumbfounded. It was only natural since neither Asuhain-san nor I had written this prompt. Then suddenly President Kurenai’s words played in my head. *“That’s for me to know and for you to eagerly anticipate.”*

“Ah.” *Is this the one she entered?*

I couldn’t believe that I’d actually drawn her prompt out of the dozens in there. Was she a seer or something? I stared at her prompt and thought for a little. In the meantime, the other students decided to go for new prompts.

“Yeah, hell no!”

“This game is rigged!”

And with that, they ran off towards the easier prompts. I

should've done the same. After all, there was literally only one person I could think of who fit the description. *If I go through with this, that'll mean...* But there came a time when you needed to lay everything out in the open with your words and actions.

"That's right..."

Every now and then, I needed to be direct. I needed to show *him* what was on my mind through my actions. If I were to tackle this prompt, he couldn't ignore what it meant. I clutched the prompt in my hand and ran in the opposite direction from the other participants.

"What's this?! Irido from Class 1-7 isn't drawing a new prompt! She's taking up the challenge!"

The passionate casting of the announcer spurred me on as I ran. I kept running towards the tennis court. But...

"Huh?"

Though I'd arrived at the corner of the tennis court that Kawanami said they'd be at, I didn't see any sign of Mizuto or Higashira-san.

The Responsibility of the Rejecter

Mizuto Irido

"First the manga café and now this... We certainly do seem to frequently find ourselves in compromising situations, don't we?" Isana let out a listless giggle as she sat down on the worn-out bench.

I followed suit and sat next to her. "I wouldn't say we *fell* into that situation at the manga café. It was more like...people in the world are too horny."

"What's wrong with that? Procreation is pivotal in these dire times."

"Tossing away civility and devolving to wild animals is *not* the solution."

Seriously. Animals. Sure, I might not have been able to talk, given my behavior in middle school, but as someone who'd moved past that phase of my life, my disdain for that kind of stuff had only been amplified. *Is that how people viewed us back then?*

"It's as if the blinders have been removed. I see the truth now." Isana giggled again, touching the tips of her fingers together in front of her mouth.

"What truth?"

"The things that occur in dirty manga and videos also exist in real life... It's so obvious if you think about it, but it never crossed my mind..."

"Oh..."

I understand where she's coming from. It must've felt unreal to see people your age—classmates—doing that kinda stuff in real life. You'd never believe it until you saw it. Then you'd learn that it was very real. Actually, this was even more real than that time I had bought contraceptives.

"I... I can do those kinds of things too...right?" Isana mumbled, looking away from me.

I considered pretending I didn't hear her, but ultimately, instead I responded with some very carefully chosen words. "Well, yeah... Functionally, of course you can."

"It's...difficult to picture. Do you think that I'd perhaps have a clearer image if...I were in a relationship?"

This was usually the part where I'd quip about why she was asking *me*, but I couldn't bring myself to. She hadn't specified who this hypothetical relationship would've been with, but honestly, I didn't have to ask. *It's probably not hubris to think that the only person in her mind is the first person she fell in love with, aka me.*

She was the type of person who could only fall in love once in life and she'd wasted it on me. For someone like her who found love to be a pain in the ass, there was little to no chance that she was capable—no, that it was necessary for her to fall in love multiple times. I was the same, so I completely understood. As her friend, I wished I could help her achieve true love. But I couldn't change who I was or who I was in love with. I had already fallen in love, and it wasn't with her. That's why we could only be friends.

"Hard to say," I responded. "After all, knowing you, if it ever got to that point, you'd get really excited, but then you'd freak out when things got real."

"Rude! But...you're not wrong." She stuck out her lower lip and clutched her knees on the bench, just as she often did in the library. Next, she buried her mouth in between her knees and began muttering. "It's not my fault. Even if I work up the resolve...I can't turn off my anxiety about what's going to happen." This wasn't exactly something I could comment on. "Hypothetically..." she started, remaining in the same position and peering up at me. "If I were to still be aiming for my one shot...would you be upset with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps when we're older, we'll be drinking together and then...you know."

"Okay, things are getting too real, and it's bothering me," I joked, looking away from her. "Whatever hopes or desires are floating around your head don't bother me at all. You can think about whatever you want."

"Really?"

“You’re not doing anything wrong. So...as the person who rejected you, I’ll take the responsibility.”

I wasn’t going to try and skirt the issue. Just as I said, this was one of my responsibilities as the person who rejected her. *You don’t have to worry about anything. The reason we stayed friends was all because of my own selfishness.*

Isana let out a deep exhale all of a sudden and buried her entire face into her legs. “I want to do dirty things! I want you to ravage me, Mizuto-kuuun!”

“Lower your voice!”

“I’m free to think about whatever I want, am I not?”

“Yeah, *think* being the operative word! Not *yell*! Where’s your common sense?”

Isana chuckled and raised her head before sheepishly shifting closer to me. “I’m slightly relieved.”

“About what?”

“You’re going to take responsibility for my rejection, right? In that case, I don’t have to force myself to walk on eggshells. It means that you will make sure that we don’t cross any lines we’re not supposed to.”

“Well... Yeah, I guess.” *I’m getting a bad feeling.*

Isana’s laughter suddenly turned vulgar as she moved yet closer to me. “Essentially...you won’t stop me from doing any kind of dirty things to you...right?”

“How did you get that from what I sa—”

Isana quickly extended her arms and wrapped them around my neck. It was like she was hugging a stuffed animal. All at once, I felt the two swellings on her chest press against me, and my body was enveloped by an unimaginable softness and warmth from her skin.

“Come on, Mizuto-kun! You have to be *responsible*! Ensure we don’t cross any lines, or else we really won’t be *just* friends any longer.”

“What do you mean by that? Get off me!”

“You really want me, a girl, to say it? Of course I’m talking about —”

“Fine! Stop! You don’t have to say it—just get off of me!”

“Nope! I won’t hold back!”

She gets so full of herself so easily! Regardless of my responsibility or whatever, I need to teach her a—

“Higashira-san.”

Both Isana and I froze at this unexpected voice. We couldn’t even separate from each other. All we could do was stiffly turn our heads towards the source of the voice, like rusted robots. It was Yume. She was out of breath, but she was approaching us one step after another.

The expression on her face was a mix of focus and anger. She stopped in front of us, and Isana slowly moved away from me as if she were trying to make distance between herself and a fierce beast.

“Y-Y-Yume-san! Th-This is merely a...a joke between friends!”

“Higashira-san.”

Isana froze, losing any words she was about to say as Yume called her name again. Looking closer, I realized that there was sweat dripping down her temples, and she was exhaling in an effort to steady her breathing.

Yume opened her mouth again. “I’m in the middle of a treasure hunt.”

“Huh?” Isana looked completely confused.

Yume extended her hand and grabbed me by the wrist. “What I’m saying is...” Her grip tightened as she glared Isana down. “Would you mind *returning* Mizuto to me for a while?” Yume asked—or rather, declared.

Isana blinked at the obvious strangeness in the words she’d chosen. “Huh? If it’s a treasure hunt, shouldn’t you be *borrowing*—”

“No, you’re *returning* him,” Yume repeated, this time with a smile. “Okay?”

“Y-Yes! O-Of course! Go ahead!”

And like a pitiful underling, Isana moved even farther away from me.



Yume nodded as if to say “good” and then pulled me up by my wrist. Then, she finally looked at me. “So, that’s how it is. Thanks for your assistance.”

“Shouldn’t you be asking me for permission first? I don’t remember agreeing to go...”

“I already know that you’re not going to say yes, so I’m taking you by force.”

This is tyranny! As I was dragged away, I saw Isana, spacing out, staring at the sky like an underling who’d been knocked to their butt.

“Wow, that warning was... Wow... Heh heh...” she muttered to herself.

“Why does she seem so happy?”

“Beats me...”

There’s a limit to how many of her actions I can take responsibility for.

The Way You See Me

Yume continued dragging me towards the school courtyard. I’d asked her what prompt she’d drawn, and she’d paused before answering.

“Something only you could fit, in my opinion,” she’d said.

What did she mean by that? Something that doesn’t apply to anyone but me? Family? That would make sense since parents and guardians don’t come to the sports festival. Siblings? That also makes sense since I’m her only sibling. But maybe... I began thinking about something that’d be a little too convenient for me. I couldn’t just sit around waiting for what I wanted to fall into my lap, could I?

Was interpreting things to suit my narrative okay, though? Sure, it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. There’d been plenty of signs—so many that it was getting difficult to write them off as misunderstandings. But still, my mind didn’t want to take its foot off the brakes. Was it really okay for me to make that simple of a guess?

I was realizing now how annoyingly complicated our relationship was. The prompt couldn’t have been “the person you like.” No, that phrase was way too simplistic to describe how either of us felt. *Hey, Yume. What am I to you?*

“Oh?! Irido from Class 1-7 has returned with...a boy! She’s brought a boy with her!”

As she pulled me through the school courtyard, towards the goal, we were met with stares and cheers. I felt so out of place, but Yume firmly gripped my hand as if to reassure me.

“And she’s reached the finish line! As long as the judges approve her answer, she’ll get first place! What prompt did she have?!”

I saw a familiar face at the finish line. It was a small-framed girl who had a very distinct presence—the student council president, Suzuri Kurenai. She began practically beaming when she saw Yume, out of breath from running, dragging me with her.

“Your prompt, please.”

Yume silently placed the piece of paper in her outstretched hand. Kurenai-senpai opened it and ran her eyes over the text before letting out a cryptic chuckle.

“Felt like being straightforward, did you?”

Yume sheepishly smiled. “Yes, at least for today.”

After hearing her response, Kurenai-senpai faced the broadcaster and formed a circle over her head with both arms.

“It seems that she’s been given the okay! She passed!” the announcer yelled.

Yume turned to me after getting the piece of paper with the prompt on it back from Kurenai-senpai.

“Let’s go.”

I was dragged to the announcer, still not knowing what my role was. *Is this how it usually goes?* Yume handed the piece of paper to the announcer. They held the microphone in one hand and the paper in the other.

“Oh! I see...” they said, looking at my face and grinning. “Irido from class 1-7 had the prompt...” I suddenly felt incredibly nervous. In just a few seconds, my identity would be revealed by the microphone. “The person I want to cross the finish line with!”

The crowd of students roared with commotion. *Huh? The person she wants to cross the finish line with? And that’s me? Why?*

“Could you share your thought process here? If I’m right... It seems that you’ve brought Mizuto Irido-kun—a classmate of yours as well as your sibling, right?”

Why are you so aware of our circumstances? It almost felt like they were paparazzi. *I guess students really have their interest focused on Yume.* The interpretation of the prompt was incredibly broad. If the person who’d received it chose someone of the same sex, most people would assume they’re just close friends. But if they chose someone of the opposite sex...all kinds of unfounded rumors might start. *She knew that, and yet—*

“Yes, that’s right...” Yume said boldly—not a shred of fear in her voice—straight into the microphone. “After all, I *am* a brother lover.”

It was such a simple response. She didn’t try to make it vague, nor did she hesitate. She answered honestly. In response, I could hear scattered laughter from the crowd.

“Pfft! Ha ha ha!” the announcer laughed into the microphone. “I see! That makes sense! Give it up for our clear winner, Yume Irido!”

Amidst the applause, Yume led me back to the participant area. For everyone unaware, what she'd said sounded like nothing more than a joke. But to me...she was being too straightforward, making me immediately jump to convenient conclusions that fit my...

"Hey—"

"It may not be often, but..." Yume said, interrupting me. "I can be honest every now and then, y'know?" She gripped my wrist firmly as if to say she wasn't letting me go. She looked right into my eyes as if she were pleading with me before saying, "That's why...it makes me a little sad when you run away."

Me? Run away? But then I suddenly remembered something. I'd panicked and run away from her when I was hiding Isana's bra.

"Oh..." Had she been worrying about that this entire time? Was I interpreting this right? "Fine..." I decided to honor her honesty and return it with a mostly honest response myself. "I'd rather not get dragged off again, anyway."

In the end, I couldn't stop myself from going back to my usual pointed retorts. *Urgh. No! This is hard for me...* I thought she would've been angry, but instead, she seemed...happy? Her lips were curling into a smile.

"Next time, I'll just try even harder to catch you before you can get away."

"To annoy me?"

"Otherwise, you'll probably start doing naughty things to Higashira-san."

"You've got that totally backwards!"

Yume giggled. *I get it now. I really do. I know how you see me now.* The cheering from the treasure hunt sounded so far away under this seemingly endless autumn sky. The two of us had no clue where the finish line for the two of us really was, though.

Tower of Vanity

Yume Irido

"The Rakuro Sports Festival has now ended," the announcer said over the PA.

Now that the sports festival had ended without incident and the student council had finished cleaning up, I could finally relax. This had been the first event I'd assisted in managing. It had been as hectic as I'd expected, but as a result I felt fulfilled, much more so than I had after my middle school festivals.

For someone like me, who had always struggled to find the fun in the activities, actively participating in things through work made the

experience all the more enjoyable.

“Yume-kun, Ran-kun, you can leave the rest to us. Go get changed and head home.”

“No, Senpai! I’d like to stay until the end, and—”

“Asuhain-san.” I could tell how serious she was, so I used a soft voice to calm her down. “Let’s take her up on her offer. You’re tired too, aren’t you?”

“She’s right,” President Kurenai agreed. “You should let your upperclassmen show off a little.”

Asuhain-san seemed discontent with leaving, but her respect for President Kurenai outweighed that. “Okay...” she said reluctantly.

Asuhain-san was a real go-getter, but she didn’t have enough stamina to back it up. She’d frequently tried to covertly catch her breath, but both President Kurenai and I had noticed. If we let her overwork her small body, she might pay the price.

“Have a good night, okay?” President Kurenai said.

“Thank you. You too...”

“Thanks.”

I found my eyes wandering to Haba-senpai, who was silently standing next to her. She’d been busy all day ordering people around, helping them run the events, and then participating in them herself. She probably wanted to at least be able to spend these last few moments of the day with him. It was better to release some of that pent-up frustration now than have it explode in front of other people like she’d done before.

I pulled Asuhain-san towards the student council room. We needed to change out of our gym clothes that had gotten dirty from being outside all day.

“How was the festival?” I asked, trying to engage in small talk as we walked.

“Well...it was quite interesting to see up close how President Kurenai works,” Asuhain-san said in her usual stiff voice.

“I don’t think that has much to do with the festival...”

“It was fun. I think I’ve found that I’m more suited to helping organize it than participating in it.”

I giggled. “I’m with you there.”

“There’s a limit to my athleticism with how short my limbs are. Plus, I have some very unnecessary things hanging off of me,” she said, raising her soft but disproportionately large chest.

If Akatsuki-san had been present, she would’ve snapped. “It really looks like a lot to deal with... You’re carrying a lot of weight, there.”

“You’re making it sound like you don’t experience the same issue. I mean, you’re not exactly small yourself.”

“You think so?”

“You seem at least above average.”

“Ah, that’s true. I have a friend who’s, uh, amazing, to the point that my senses have been dulled. Aso-senpai seems a little bigger than me too.”

“Huh?”

“Hm? Did I say something wrong?” I glanced at Asuhain-san, who seemed shook, as if I’d seen through a lie or something. *I don’t think I said anything weird... Did I?*

Asuhain-san took a little to gather her thoughts before speaking again. “It’s nothing. Forget about it.”

“You can’t just leave me hanging.”

“Well, if you haven’t noticed, then that’s probably for the best...”
Huh? Noticed what? Tell me! “More importantly, you know midterms are right around the corner, right?”

“Um, can we maybe *not* change topics? What haven’t I noticed?!”

“You’d better be on your game; otherwise, our competition won’t be fun at all. I don’t want you complaining about how you only did badly because you were so busy with student council work.”

“Now you’re ignoring me?! Why?! You’re freaking me out!”

Before I knew it, we were standing in front of the student council room. Asuhain-san swiftly put her hand on the handle of the door.

“If you have the luxury of worrying about something this trivial, then— Ah.” She froze as soon as we opened the door, her mouth agape.

“Ah.” As soon as I looked inside, I froze too.

“Ah.” Aso-senpai turned around and she, too, froze.

Yep, that sure was Aso-senpai, and she sure was in the middle of changing. Her sports bra was on the table, and she was in the process of hooking her normal, light pink bra, which matched her panties. What made me freeze, however, had nothing to do with her bra itself, but everything to do with the breasts that were going into them.

They’re small. When she wore clothes, there were distinct lines, showing just how well-endowed she was. Seeing her like this replaced my mental image of her decently sized mountains with tame hills.
I’m...not even sure she’s a B-cup. Maybe if I round up. But the most damning pieces of evidence were the triangular, flat objects that had been packed into her bra cups.

“Pads...”

Color gradually drained from Aso-senpai’s face, and in her shocked state, one of the pads fell out. *She puts that many in there?* One or two pads, I could definitely understand, but the amount she’d stuffed inside jumped her from an A-cup to an E-cup.

The unbelievable number of layers erected a tall tower of vanity. I was so incredibly shocked that it felt like my mind short-circuited. I

could only imagine that Aso-senpai was in an even worse state than I, though. She looked like she was about to cry.

Asuhain-san deeply exhaled and approached the statue-like Aso-senpai. "Don't let this get you so down. If anything, it's a miracle that you've gone this long without getting caught."

Aso-senpai mumbled something unintelligible in response after being comforted by Asuhain-san, a person who was not only shorter than she, at about one hundred forty-seven centimeters, but much more well-endowed.

"I'm sorry?" Asuhain-san asked.

In the next moment, Aso-senpai gripped Asuhain-san by her shirt. "What would you know?!" Asuhain-san shrieked as Aso-senpai pulled her shirt up, revealing what was underneath. "Look at you, all bouncy and jiggle! I wanna jiggle too! But. Pads. Don't. Jiggle!!!"

"Sto— Ow! You're hurting me! Don't shake them!"

"S-Senpai! Calm down!"

I finally understood why Akatsuki-san and Aso-senpai had gotten along so quickly.

Same Page

"It's impossible to stop stuffing my bra... I can't go back to how I used to be. I kept believing that one day I'd grow and wouldn't need them anymore. I kept believing, but...all that grew were the number of pads I used," Aso-senpai wailed.

Aso-senpai had finally calmed down from her rampage and was now clutching Asuhain-san like a plushie as she aired complaint after complaint. Maybe I'd been partially at fault for reacting as severely as I had. But in my defense, I'd never seen anyone who'd stuffed so many pads in their bra. I had no clue anyone like that existed. Even after I'd discovered her secret, she'd just gone back to stuffing her bra as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Feel free not to respond, but..." I started.

"What is it, Yumechi? Oh, you're pretty big... How is that fair when you're just a first-year?"

"W-Well, that aside... Does Hoshibe-senpai know?"

Aso-senpai looked away, tightly pursing her lips.

Asuhain-san furrowed her brow in exasperation as she sat on Aso-senpai's lap. "He hasn't noticed something so obvious himself? Boys really are stupid."

"A-Asuhain-san, doesn't that make me stupid for not noticing until now?"

"Sorry. But it is surprising that someone as smart and mired in excellence as the previous president couldn't tell. I guess boys and

girls really see the world differently.”

“That might be true...”

I had thought Mizuto and I had been on the same page about loads of things, but we hadn’t been. But also, maybe it wasn’t exactly a matter of same-sex individuals seeing the same thing. After all, despite being a girl, I hadn’t seen through Aso-senpai’s padding. *I wonder if Mizuto understood what I was trying to convey to him today...*

“Yumechi... No matter what you do, don’t tell him...okay?” Aso-senpai requested in an intimidating voice while patting Asuhain-san on the head for some reason. “This is a secret, okay? Under *no* circumstances can you tell him. If you do...I will seriously and utterly despise you.”

“Shouldn’t you just come clean and tell him yours— Wah!” Asuhain-san started.

“Don’t get cheeky with me, twerp! I’m gonna rub your boobs.”

“Y-You’re already rubbing them!”

With that, our first sports festival as a student council ended.

“Bye...” I said, leaving the student council room alone.

I couldn’t believe how dark it was already. *I could’ve sworn summer just ended. Why are the days so short?* Everything had been a whirlwind recently with how fast time had flown ever since the cultural festival. It had taken everything I had to keep up.

Half a year ago, days felt excruciatingly long. But things completely changed when I started living with Mizuto. A combination of a daily routine that I’d gotten used to and stimulations from first-time experiences accelerated time for me.

But even so, I couldn’t let myself relax just yet. In a few days, we’d enter test prep week and then midterms. A few days after that, we’d...

I changed out of my school shoes and into my street shoes before heading towards the school gate. The majority of the students had already left, meaning I was the only one walking out right now. Maybe that’s why I immediately noticed that there was a familiar guy waiting by the gates.

“Huh? Mizuto?”

As I got closer, Mizuto stopped leaning against the gate’s pillar and started approaching me without a word. He’d changed back into his school uniform. *It really suits him so much more than his gym clothes.*

“What are you doing here?” I asked as he stopped in front of me. “Waiting for Higashira-san?”

“Isana already went home.”

“Huh?” *So...why?* I tilted my head in confusion.

Mizuto awkwardly looked away, hesitating, before he began

speaking. "The sports festival...isn't over until we get home."

"Hm?" That was the kind of thing people said about field trips, not sports festivals.

Then, as if to cut through my obliviousness, Mizuto bluntly declared what he'd meant. "You want to cross the finish line...together, right?"

Oh. Ohh. Ohhhh! Who is this little stepbrother? He's too cute! I couldn't tell if he was simply respecting what I'd wanted to do, trying to mess with me, or trying to reward me for how hard I'd worked on the student council. Regardless, I wasn't conceited enough to think that I'd stolen his heart with my paltry actions.

But at the very least, I was certain that I'd gotten through to him, even just a little bit. We *had* to be on the same page—I was sure of it.

"What're you grinning about? You're creeping me out."

"Well, it's...you know." I bent my back a little to look up at his face. I was sure that it'd be okay for me to act like a femme fatale right now. "I was just thinking how much more of a sister lover you are than I thought."

"Huh?"

"How about I be the little sister just for today, Onii-chan?"

"Stop. I'm gonna barf."

"Onii-chaaan!" I said in a singsong voice.

"Seriously! Knock it off!"

He sounded annoyed, but he didn't run away. We walked shoulder to shoulder out of the school. There wasn't a physical finish line anywhere. Even when we got home and the day ended, there wouldn't be a physical finish line. But I knew it was out there somewhere, and I wanted to cross it with him and no one else.

Because You Watch over Me

Returning Pride with Pride

Yume Irido

With October coming to a close soon, we were now exactly one week away from the second semester midterms.

“Starting tomorrow, the student council will be off for a week,” President Suzuri Kurenai declared. “I want all of you to throw yourself into your studies and achieve results that will not bring any shame to the student council. On a related note, if you’d like to use the student council room for studying, you may submit an application to our adviser. It’s one of our many perks.”

“You *can*, but don’t. It’s a pain and a half...” Our adviser, Mr. Arakusa, groaned from his seat in the corner.

He only made appearances when he absolutely had to. Apparently, being an adviser didn’t come with a pay raise, so he wanted to put in as little effort as possible.

“Hey, Arekusa! Can we come during lunch too?”

“If you can find me, sure. And it’s *Arakusa*.”

Despite his lazy attitude, students, especially Aso-senpai, really got along with him. The idea of a teacher who was open about only working as hard as he was paid, despite being employed at such a strict school, had its appeal.

After hearing his answer, Aso-senpai giggled. “How ’bout it?” she asked, moving to sit next to Hoshibe-senpai, who’d yet again come here to play with his phone on the couch. “I’d love it if you could help me study again, Senpai.” She flashed him a side glance while rubbing her shoulder against his.

“Huh? I already taught you how to study. You should be good to go,” he said, pocketing his phone and swinging his bag across his shoulder. “Later. Good luck with midterms.” With that, he casually left the room, leaving Aso-senpai by her lonesome.

“Why can’t you just have *one* ulterior motive?!” she exclaimed towards the door that his huge body had vanished behind.

The fact that she didn’t let this get her down was what made me look up to her as my master in romance. Asuhain-san let out an exasperated sigh, but President Kurenai walked up to Master Aso and put her hand on her shoulder.

"I can teach you if you'd like, Aisa."

"No." Aso-senpai pouted. "You're too smart. I can't understand you."

"Last time I taught you, your average score should've gone up by fifteen points, though."

"Let me be clear: I hate the way you teach, so never again!"

President Kurenai wryly smiled and shrugged. *Maybe I should ask her to teach me.* I'd heard that people who were truly intelligent were good at teaching others.

I noticed that Asuhain-san was restlessly glancing up at President Kurenai. "If you want her to teach you, you should ask her, Asuhain-san," I said warmly, admiring how cute she was acting.

"Huh?! N-No, there's no point if I don't achieve my desired results on my own..."

President Kurenai turned towards us. "I think that being able to ask for help is a skill. Behold, exhibit A, Aisa. All her life, she's only ever relied on the help of others."

"Are you callin' me a rafflesia who's only able to live by leeching off of others like a parasite?!" Aso-senpai barked.

"Has someone actually called you that?" President Kurenai blinked.

Asuhain-san averted her doe-like eyes. She looked conflicted about what to do, but after a moment, she shut her eyes and opened them again, seemingly making up her mind.

"I... I'm going to study by myself," she said, flashing me a sharp look from across the table. "And this time... This time for *sure*, I will stand above you, Irido-san!"

The serious, fiery look in her eyes told the whole story: she was intent on winning and didn't want to stay on the back foot any longer. This reminded me of how I'd looked at Mizuto during the first semester midterms.

Usually, I'd just casually accept her challenge without taking it too seriously. But I knew that this was a battle of pride for her. Thinking of it like that, I was aware that I owed her a real response. So, for the first time, I decided to face her challenge head-on.

"Sure. Bring it on."

Virtual Study Session

That being said, I had a huge advantage. After all, I lived with the guy I'd been fighting with for the number one spot. Excluding the time that we'd studied together with Higashira-san and Kawanami-kun, we'd always been stubborn about studying alone. But things were different now!

I could still remember how the two of us used to study together when we had dated. It'd been so...sweet, so innocent. We'd pretend to look at textbooks while trying to brush our shoulders against each other's or put our hands on the other person's lap. It'd been so fun getting physical contact in! Well, of course, it went without saying that consequently, our grades dropped. That being said, I had changed.

I wasn't as love-addled as I'd been back then, and I knew tricks for self-control to boot. The new, improved Yume could not only efficiently gather knowledge in order to fight for the top spot but could *also* flirt at the same time!

Well, that had been my plan, at least.

"Yo! My camera on?"

"Yeah. What's up with your hair?"

"Oof. It looks rather deflated. You're reminiscent of an old-school delinquent."

"Shaddup! I *just* got outta the shower! Of course my hair's not gonna look like it usually does!"

Four familiar faces were crammed on the small screen of my phone—Kawanami-kun, Mizuto, and Higashira-san, the ones who were speaking, respectively, along with Akatsuki-san. Each of their faces were tiny, not any bigger than a spoon you'd eat ice cream with.

Mizuto looked calm and collected as usual. *Uh... We live together. Why aren't we in the same room?* I internally posed this to myself despite already knowing the answer. We had an agreement to refrain from going to each other's room at night while our parents were home. Well, even if we didn't, I couldn't flirt with him regardless since all our friends were on a call together.

But still! He was on the other side of my wall, so why did I have to see him on such a minuscule screen?! I'd never wanted a tablet or laptop as badly as I did right now. I held back a sigh and looked back at the screen.

"Are all of you good to go? Hm? Akatsuki-san?" For someone as boisterous as she was, she was being surprisingly quiet. I looked closer and noticed that her lips were, in fact, moving. "Akatsuki-san, your mic is muted."

She'd let her hair down from its usual ponytail, giving off a feel that she was in full relaxation mode. She tilted her head, furrowing her brow with confusion. Suddenly, she reached out her hands and the screen began shaking.

"Hey, don't shake it! What are you, some kinda grandma?! Fine! Fine! Sorry, hold up. I'm gonna help her," Kawanami-kun said before disconnecting.

After he left, the individual windows resized themselves, making the faces of the remaining three people slightly bigger.

"If I remember correctly, they're neighbors, aren't they?" Higashira-san asked. "His instincts as a promiscuous boy must have activated if he is heading to a girl's house at this time of night."

"I feel for him. Gotta be impossible for him to ever have a moment's rest."

"Aren't *our* rooms right next to each other, Mizuto-kun?" I huffed. "What're you trying to say?"

"Take it as you will."

Rrgh! You think it's impossible for you to ever feel a moment's rest?! Hm? Wait. If I pretend to have technical difficulties, wouldn't that force Mizuto to come to my room? My eyes were drawn to the mute button. *If... If I press this...* Just as I was within centimeters of pressing the forbidden button, I saw Kawanami-kun appear on Akatsuki-san's screen. He was looking at her screen and was fiddling with it.

"For real? You had yourself muted. That's it."

"Oh, you're right."

"How much of a klutz are you? Sheesh, you couldn't have made a more basic mistake. I don't get how you didn't realize what the problem was immediately. What'd I even bring all my stuff here for?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm so sorry for the trouble! Why don't you just study here? There's enough space for you...on the floor."

"There's *tons* of space at the table!"

Akatsuki-san kicked Kawanami-kun away, off-screen. "Sorry 'bout all that!" she said, moving close to the camera.

"So, ultimately, you will be sharing the same space as that promiscuous boy during this study session," Isana observed. "This is my earnest request, but please refrain from giving him a *hand*. There are others on this call, after all."

"Hm? What would I be giving him a hand with, exactly?"

"A hand with...you know?"

"No, I don't. Finish that thought. *Please.*"

"I-I take it back. My apologies!"

Higashira-san's attempt at a dirty joke failed in the face of Akatsuki-san's pressure. *There's no way I can admit that I had the same groundless concern as Higashira-san...*

"More importantly, Yume-chan, you're wearing glasses today?!"

"Hm? Oh, yeah... I usually wear contacts, but not when I study at home."

"They're so cute! Really has a relaxation mode vibe!"

"I think having your hair down really suits you too, Akatsuki-san. It gives you a really neat-and-tidy vibe."

"Aha ha ha. Thanks!"

I noticed that while we were complimenting each other, Mizuto let out a small yawn.

“Oh, now that I look, you’re wearing glasses too, Mizuto-kun,” Higashira-san said.

Well observed. He certainly is.

“These are the ones that block blue light. I always wear them when I use the computer.”

“Ooh! They suit you very much! May I take a screenshot?”

“You may not.”

“Why not?! You’re simultaneously cute and cool!”

“Cause you’re creeping me out.”

It may have been my imagination, but I could’ve sworn I saw Mizuto’s eyes flit towards something. Our eyes didn’t meet, but I had a feeling he was looking at my video. Wait, was he looking at me when he said he was being creeped out?! *Okay, sure, I may have gone a little bit crazy with the pictures when I first saw you in glasses, and yeah, even I’d classify that as creepy, but I couldn’t help myself! It’s your fault for being a hottie! Okay, yeah, I’m acting like a creep.*

“I guess we should start studying soon...” I said, trying to put my weird actions of the past behind me. “Don’t feel pressured to stay on the call if you start to get tired. Let’s keep this chill and help each other out.”

“Okay! Oh, right. Maki-chan and Nasuka-chan said they might join, so make sure you don’t get anywhere near the camera, Kawanami.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“I haven’t told them that we’re neighbors! Are you dense?!”

“Ow! Don’t kick me!” Kawanami complained off-screen.

Higashira-san seemed dispirited. “As a single person, it’s truly painful to have to endure a video feed of two people flirting,” she exhaled dejectedly.

I can’t agree more. I want to be in the same room as Mizuto! This isn’t fair, Akatsuki-san!

“Mizuto-kun,” Higashira-san continued, fidgeting, “may I sleep over at your domicile in the near future?”

“No,” he responded immediately.

“Why not?!” she whined.

“The thought of you trying to shoot your shot creeps me out.”

“You’ve grown so much. At first, you would simply shoot me down, but now you go so far as to say that my actions creep you out.”

I stayed quiet as Higashira-san stated my own desires so plainly. *I’m so sorry for wanting to shoot my shot.*

Numerous Experiences Made Him Grow

Hearing a strange sound, I looked up from my math textbook and realized that Isana, one of the people in the five windows in the video chat, was nodding off.

“Isana.”

“Wha? I-I’m awake...”

“Sleep if you’re tired. There’s no point in forcing yourself to study. You’re not gonna retain any of it.”

“Mmnnmn.”

What kind of sound is that, even? She must really be at her limit.

“Wow, what a gentleman! I might’ve misjudged you, Yume’s little brother,” one of Yume’s friends, who had joined partway through, chimed in. *Her name’s...Maki Sakamizu. I still remember it.* She had short hair and was incredibly energetic. “You’re, like, usually kinda cold, but deep down, you’re actually a pretty nice guy, huh? Especially to Higashira-san,” she said, resting her face in her hand while twirling a mechanical pencil.

“Not really. I’m just a bit overprotective of her ’cause she’s bad at existing. Also, I’m not Yume’s *little* brother.”

“Oh, right, I hear you two have the same birthday. What a coincidence,” a girl with a bob cut leisurely said, slightly yawning. *She’s...Kanai. Right. Nasuka Kanai. I remember her.* She always looked like she was one second away from passing out, but the way she was rubbing her eyes only made that look even more like the case. “Ah, I can’t take it anymore. I’m about to pass out. I think I’m gonna log off.”

“Huh? Then I’m gonna dip too. We still have a week to study anyway,” Sakamizu said, stretching.

Yume dryly smiled. “Be careful. Time’s going to fly by before you know it.”

“Yeah, I know, I know.”

Shortly after, Sakamizu and Kanai dropped off the call. In the meantime, Isana had already passed out on her desk.

“Isana, sleep in your bed.”

“Mmmm.”

“Higashira-san? Ugh, she can’t hear us.”

I sighed, then muted my mic and began calling her. I watched as Isana, mostly out of reflex, inched her arm to her phone and put it against her head.

“Yes... Who is it...?”

“I guess you don’t care what’s gonna happen to you if you don’t properly sleep in your bed, do you?” I whispered in a low voice.

“Hwaah?!” Isana shot up.

“Good girl. Now end the call and go to your bed.”

“O-Okay. I understand...” she said, getting ready to end the call in a half-asleep state.

“Night.”

“Okie...”

I hung up. “All done.”

“What did you say to her?” Yume asked, half frightened and half exasperated.

Nothing in particular. Just to go to bed.

Minami-san had her head resting on her hands and her eyes seemingly focused on me. “Aren’t you getting a little too good at sweet-talking women? Maybe it’s ’cause Higashira-san’s such an easy mark.”

“I know what does and doesn’t work on her. Simple as that. This is the only method I can think of to control her unpredictable actions.” It also made her happy for some reason.

“She deserves *nothing*, Irido!” Kawanami, who’d been silent while Kanai and Sakamizu were on the call per Minami-san’s orders, yelled out off-screen. “You’re just gonna feed her ego! She’s gonna start acting like you’re boyfriend-girlfriend even though you guys aren’t even dating!”

“She already does that, actually, but I don’t care. She can tell the difference between reality and fiction. As long as the two of us know what our relationship is, it doesn’t matter how others interpret it.”

“Hm... I don’t know about that,” Minami-san remarked while shoving Kawanami to the side. “What do you think, Yume-chan? Is there anything different you’ve noticed about Irido-kun since he became friends with Higashira-san?”

“Huh? Uh... I’m not sure. I don’t think there’s anything in particular...”

“So, then...you’re saying that Irido-kun’s always been a lady-killer?”

I saw Yume glance at a corner of her screen, most likely at me. “Yeah, maybe...”

Why are you acting like some kind of know-it-all? I don’t recall ever pulling any moves on you when we were dating. I do remember, however, you getting hot and bothered all on your own. If I was good at that kinda stuff, maybe I’d be able to be more decisive.

“Oh? In that case, do you mind telling us exactly what kind of situation he—” Kawanami started.

“Okay, I think we’re done for today,” Yume interrupted. “Time for a bath! Bye!” And then she disconnected.

“Oh, she ran away,” he observed. “Well then, Irido, do you have any idea what she might be—”

“Later.”

“Hey, wait!”

I left the call. *Doesn't that stupid voyeur know not to kick the hornet's nest?*

The Person I Love

After our virtual study session ended, I grabbed my textbooks and headed down to the living room. I still hadn't reviewed as much as I'd wanted to, so my plan was to take a short break and then get back to reading.

I boiled some water in the electric kettle and added a tea bag. Drinking tea at this time of night would normally make it hard to sleep, but I was already a night owl, so caffeine didn't mean much in my case.

I sat down on the couch and brought the hot cup of black tea to my mouth, waiting for my brain to reboot. When I felt ready to dive in again, I opened a textbook. A few minutes later, just as I was turning to the next page, I heard the living room door open.

“Oh, you *are* here.”

A pajama-clad Yume appeared in the doorway. She was no longer wearing the glasses she'd had on during the study session, and her hair was now tied into two tails that draped over each of her shoulders.

“Uh-huh...”

Yume made her way to the kitchen. “You aren't gonna take a bath?” she asked.

“I will in a bit.”

“Kay.”

I tried focusing on my textbook while she filled a cup with water. After a bit, I heard her place it down and then start approaching me, her footsteps growing louder with each step.

“Hey,” she called out, causing me to finally look up. She leaned over the back of the couch and looked at me from the side. “Is it okay if I...study here with you a bit?”

Suddenly my mind was struck by a whirlwind of different interpretations. The first was that she had some questions she wanted to ask me about the material. The next was that she wanted to continue the study session. And the last was the most simple and straightforward one—she didn't have a reason; she simply wanted to spend time with me.

Out of the storm of thoughts came these three simple words: “Knock yourself out.” *I gotta say, I'm good at playing it cool.*

Yume seemed relieved. Her lips relaxed. “I'll go grab my textbook,” she said, jogging out of the living room. Before I knew it,

she had gone upstairs and returned with her stuff, taking a seat right next to me.

And thus, our study session began anew. It certainly wasn't as lively as our virtual one. All I did was read my textbook while Yume solved practice problems in her notebook. We didn't have any questions for each other or topics of conversation. The only sounds filling the room were the scratching of her mechanical pencil against paper, pages flipping, and the clock ticking.

Sometimes I'd glance over at Yume's profile as she stared at her notebook. She didn't seem nearly as desperate as she had during the first semester midterms. She seemed calm yet focused as she worked on the practice questions.

Suddenly, Isana's words played in my head. "*I believe that the person you love is the one whose side profile you find yourself looking at the most.*" This simple definition made me incredibly conscious of the meaning behind what I was doing right now. All I was doing was glancing over at her, but it felt like I was doing something embarrassing. Even if I wanted to avert my gaze, before I knew it, I was looking at her again.



But I guess that's just how things go. As much as I hated to admit it, it was. *Agh. Dammit. It's getting really obvious that I'm doing a crappy job of hiding my thoughts.* It took a lot of effort to refocus myself on my textbook. This wasn't the time for me to be slipping. There was an important date in November, pretty much right after we finished midterms.

After a while, I noticed that it was midnight. *I should take a bath. It's starting to get cold.* I began to close my textbook when I caught sight of Yume glancing at me.

"What's up?"

"Oh, nothing..." she said, her eyes flitting back and forth between me and her notebook. "All I was thinking was how you have the same expression whether you're reading for pleasure or for school."

Isana's words echoed in my head again for some reason. *"I believe that the person you love is the one whose..."* I immediately stopped myself from trying to interpret why they had. It was a steep path that might lead me to a world of hurt if I wasn't careful.

"Whatever I'm reading for, it makes no difference," I said, giving an extremely dull, lifeless answer.

Then I told her that I was gonna take a bath, and left the living room. *Am I...scared? Of course I am. I absolutely can't fail this time.*

The Only Way You Know How to Live

Yume Irido

Our virtual study sessions had yielded better results than expected. The remote aspect of it was very beneficial. It would've been hard to concentrate if we were all in the same place; in all likelihood, we would've just fooled around. It also placed restrictions on us all—the biggest being that we couldn't play around on our phones while on the call. In my opinion, it had been a huge success.

Studying had been going well over the course of the week, but then one day, I went to the student council room to do some studying. To my surprise, there were already two people there.

"Hello..." I said in a low voice, but they didn't respond.

Or rather, they couldn't respond, because they were asleep. Hoshibe-senpai was on the visitor's couch, as usual, with an open textbook splayed over his face. His appearance was to be expected. What surprised me, though, was the *other* person napping. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to see Asuhain-san fast asleep at the meeting table.

I quietly approached her and glanced at her face, which was glued

to a page of her open notebook while she peacefully slept, cute as a kitten. She was still holding her mechanical pencil, so I figured she had passed out while studying. *I can only imagine how tired she is.*

Ever since we'd entered test week, I hadn't seen Asuhain-san as much since student council activities had been put on hold. I'd sometimes pass her in the hallways, and I was able to tell at a glance how tired she was. She must've been putting a lot of effort into her studies, or at least that was my guess considering how fired up she had seemed for midterms. It really was like looking at a past version of myself.

I brought out a blanket that Hoshibe-senpai had left in the documents room and gently draped it over Asuhain-san's shoulders. *I'll let her sleep for a little longer.* I quieted my breathing and began studying. After around twenty or so minutes, Asuhain-san began to stir.

"Mm..." As she got up, the blanket slid off.

She looked at it in a daze, not completely understanding what'd happened.

"Morning," I said.

This really seemed to perk her up because in the next moment, Asuhain-san's eyes widened, and she gasped as she looked at the notebook she'd been using as a pillow.

"W-Was I asleep?!"

"Yep. Fast asleep."

"Oh..." Her childlike face filled with regret. "Did you..." she began, picking up the blanket.

"Yeah, you looked tired, so I thought it'd be best to let you sleep a little longer."

"Thank you, but...I'd have preferred it if you'd woken me up." She frowned when she glanced at the clock.

"You were only asleep for about twenty minutes... Well, since I came in, at least."

"Every minute counts. If I'm going to beat you and be top of our class, then I can't spare even a second."

I knew exactly how she felt. Back in the first semester, I had pushed myself so hard to maintain the number one spot. I understood all too well the crushing pressure of making every second count and realizing that you need more time. It had gotten to the point that I had begun cutting sleep to give myself more time.

But in reality, essentially putting my life on the line like that wasn't nearly as important as I'd thought. It was all thanks to Mizuto taking the top spot away from me that let me see that.

"Asuhain-san...why is it so important that you beat me?" I couldn't help asking her this after seeing my past self in her.

I'd obsessed over maintaining the top spot in our grade in order to keep my image of being the best. But what was Asuhain-san obsessing over so much that she wanted to be number one?

"Because that's all I have," she said firmly, taking up her pencil again and flipping through her textbook. "I've always been the runt. Weak in every fight. Because of that, I could never get back at the boys who made fun of me for my name. That's why, at the very least, I thought I could get back at them and win out in intelligence." Her hand didn't stop writing even for a moment as she spoke, like it was second nature to her. "Even if I got full points on everything, they'd praise others for being fast or being good at games and say how obsessed with studying I was. The bitterness from all that has never faded."

"That's why you're still studying hard? To get back at them?"

"No... Honestly, I don't really know if that's the reason anymore, but..." she trailed off before continuing. "Despite everything, it didn't discourage me. I kept getting full points on tests, believing that studying was everything."

"What fueled you that much? If you weren't getting the recognition you wanted, what was it?"

"No, actually, there was a time my efforts were recognized," she said in a soft but firm tone. "One of the many times I got full points, a guy said something...I think."

"What did he say?"

"I don't really remember, but it was something like, 'Wow...'"

Though she'd been using vague words like "think" and "something like," I was almost certain that it was all just a way for her to pretend like she didn't remember it vividly. The proof was how she could remember something that hadn't been said emphatically, emotionally, or intentionally.

Whether that boy remembered what he'd said didn't matter; it had had a huge impact on her. Though it'd been nothing more than a whisper, that one word of his had saved Asuhain-san. *So she studies this hard keeping that in mind...*

"Anyway, that's my only way to fight those around me. I have to keep being the best when it comes to grades." She raised her head to look at me. "But then *you* appeared in front of me, Irido-san." I felt overwhelmed by the pressure behind her eyes.

After placing first on the entrance exam and becoming the new student representative, I couldn't differentiate between all the different faces in the audience. At best, I barely made out Mizuto, mom, and Mineaki-ojisan. Back then, everyone just blended together, but in that sea of faces, she was there. Asuhain-san had been in that crowd, looking up at me as her sworn enemy.

“This is all so dumb.” Suddenly, a voice called out, interrupting our conversation. In the next moment, Hoshibe-senpai got up from the couch. *He’s awake?* He let out a yawn and looked at Asuhain-san while resting his head in his hand. “Do you know how dumb it is to say that all you have is *studying*? Humans are nowhere near that one-dimensional.”

Asuhain-san’s eyebrow twitched, and her pencil stopped moving. An angry aura emanated from her small body, making me freeze up, unable to stop her from doing what she did next. “What gives you the right to unilaterally decide that my way of living is wrong, Senpai?” she snapped, turning to face him. “People like me exist. You’re just ignorant of that fact, plain and simple.”

“Can’t be ignorant of something that doesn’t exist. Maybe you’re just ignorant of the fact that studying is something only students do. What’s your plan here, get held back and be a student forever?”

“That’s not my point, and you know it! What I’m trying to say is that there are people who can only live by obsessing over one thing.”

“And you’re willing to sacrifice anything to achieve that goal? Whoa, we got a real-life protagonist over here!”

If Asuhain-san was a raging fire of emotions, Hoshibe-senpai was a lofty cloud. He wasn’t even looking at her anymore and had begun using his phone. “You’re not long for the world if you keep livin’ like that.”

“Everyone dies someday...”

“That’s not the point. Sheesh, you really don’t get it. I guess I’m just a third-year brat, so maybe I don’t have the right to say this, but if you’re working so hard that you’re gonna put yourself in an early grave, isn’t it better to work less and live longer?”

Though he wasn’t looking at her, he wasn’t ignoring her one bit. Sure, his demeanor wasn’t ideal, but I got the feeling that he was concerned about her. But none of that was picked up on by Asuhain-san, who was still in a rage.

“A-All you do is take naps, put in little to no effort, and then easily snag a college recommendation at the end of it all! That’s who you are! You don’t know what it’s like to be me, someone who *has* to be desperate. You don’t get me at all!” Asuhain-san screamed, angrily stuffing her textbooks and notebooks into her bag.

“Asuhain-san!” I tried to stop her, but she swung her bag onto her shoulders and quickly exited the room.

I exhaled and glanced at Hoshibe-senpai as he aimlessly fiddled with his phone. “Senpai...I understand that you’re worried about Asuhain-san, but you could’ve said all that in a better way.”

Hoshibe-senpai lightly scratched his head. “Yeah, I kinda messed up, huh?”

“You did. You should have Aso-senpai teach you how to treat girls.”

“That’s a pretty hefty fine you’re giving me.” Hoshibe-senpai exhaled and looked at the ceiling. “Sorry, Irido. I got a little heated. Wasn’t like me at all.”

“You...did? What got you so worked up?”

“Well...” He trailed off for a bit while opening and closing the hand that he’d been resting on the back of the couch. “I can’t raise my right arm past my shoulder.”

“Huh?”

“Things falling into place now?” He didn’t look at me. His expression didn’t show any emotion, but I felt like I understood.

I was beginning to understand why someone as whimsical and prone to nap-taking was so admired by both Haba-senpai and President Kurenai, and why his body looked as if he’d done some kind of sport in the past. It felt like I was a tiny step closer to seeing him for who he really was.

“Watch over her for me, Irido, will ya?”

“Me?”

“I could talk her ear off, but nothing I say, no matter how much wisdom there is to it, will matter. Not unless it comes from the right person.” Though it was for just a brief second, Hoshibe-senpai finally looked at me.

Because You Watch over Me

“Yume, Mizuto-kun? We’re going to bed, okay?”

“Don’t push yourselves too hard. Got it?”

“Okay!” I said.

Mom and Mineaki-ojisan left the living room to go to their room. Mizuto, who was sitting next to me, gave a small wave. Every night after our virtual study session ended, Mizuto and I came down to the living room to continue studying on our own.

If we kept going to each other’s rooms to study night after night, that might create some suspicion, but if we met up in the living room, then we could keep studying without raising any flags. This wasn’t something we’d discussed and decided beforehand, but it was almost like we’d found a loophole to spend our nights together.

If this had been me in the first semester, I wouldn’t have been able to focus on studying at all. But now, I could sit next to him like this without even giving it a second thought. I didn’t feel overly conscious—if anything, I felt comfortable and calm. I even found that I could focus on work even more easily than I had in the past. Thanks to that, studying had gotten pretty efficient.

I wonder if Asuhain-san is still pushing herself. Hoshibe-senpai had said it was important for her to hear the right thing from the right person. Sure, I'd been like her once, forcing myself to my limits to try and stay at the top, but then I lost to Mizuto. After that, I didn't study like I was possessed for the finals and managed to reclaim my spot. That being said, telling her to just be like me and to take it easy would only sound like I was belittling her. *What can I do?* What could someone like me, who'd gone through the same process of working myself to the bone, do? After all, it was only because I'd gone through that process that I'd become who I was now.

"Hey," Mizuto suddenly called out. "You okay?"

"Huh? Oh..." While I was deep in thought, my hands had stopped moving, and he'd apparently noticed.

He shifted his gaze from his notebook to my face. "Something happen?"

"Nothing really... Not to me."

"With the student council, then?"

How did you guess? Then again, he was probably able to narrow it down by thinking about things and people in my life that weren't in his.

"Yeah, something with one of the girls."

"Wow, so you finally have the leisure to worry about someone else? I'm glad."

"Yeah, thanks to you." I giggled.

But wait... I didn't have any basis for this. It wasn't as if he'd telegraphed it with the way he'd been acting, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he'd been waiting for me to confide in him.

"If...you have spare leisure too, then..."

"I have five times as much leisure as you."

"Is it okay to tell you about something that I've been worrying about, then?"

Mizuto looked back at his textbook without saying a word. This meant that he was only going to listen, and that he could do so without interrupting his studying. So, I summed up everything that had happened today at the student council, about Asuhain-san and Hoshibe-senpai's opinion. After I was done, Mizuto concisely laid out his thoughts without looking up.

"I agree with the ex-student council president. He makes a good point. It's definitely better to work less and live longer."

"Yeah... I think so too."

"If you dig in your heels about something, then it's hard to hold on when the ground disappears beneath you. Remember what almost happened to you in the first semester? You weren't living a very balanced life. It's like that."

When I lost to Mizuto, I learned that I wouldn't lose my friends even if I wasn't at the top of the standings. I realized that I didn't need to keep clinging to my little piece of the earth and that there were plenty of other places I could walk. But...

"It makes sense logically, but for someone amped up on emotion, it won't mean a thing. To her, it's like being backseated in a video game," Mizuto added.

"That's...a good point. No matter how logically sound your argument is, it doesn't matter if it doesn't get through to the other person."

"This reminds me of when my homeroom teacher looked at me like I was crazy when I told them I wanted to not only go here, but that I wanted to get a scholarship too."

"Oh, that happened to me too! I didn't care what they told me. I just knew that I had to go to Rakuro to avoid being in the same high school as you."

"It was amazing how quick they flip-flopped after finding out I passed." Mizuto chuckled.

Ultimately, both of us passed and got into Rakuro, which initially made me feel pretty depressed, but now I could look back on it and laugh.

"Back then, I realized that no one but you can be convinced that you'll succeed. The only way to find out who's right is by going for it. If the girl you're talking about loses the support of the ground she's standing on, she might get discouraged, or maybe she won't. She could also be one of those rare people who defy logic and don't even know how to be discouraged."

"Are there...even people like that?"

"Isana Higashira." *Oh... Okay, I'm convinced.* She certainly fell into that category since she essentially remained undeterred even after Mizuto rejected her. "Ultimately, nobody's exactly the same."

So because everyone has their own way of living that works for them, we can't say anything about it? "That's...kinda sad to think about."

It was almost as if he was saying that understanding others was impossible. No matter how much you thought you were on the same page, people were ultimately different, and because of that, they fundamentally couldn't understand each other. Was that what he meant?

Mizuto fell silent and began thinking, before suddenly pointing to my notebook. "If you feel that way, you should study."

"Huh?"

"Dive in with everything you got and find out who's right."

This didn't sound like an answer Mizuto would usually give. It was so simple. *But then again...maybe it is like him.* There was a lot of

reasoning behind the answer he'd come up with—plain and simple, whoever won was right.

Asuhain-san couldn't prove that her thinking was right unless she beat me. So I had to keep beating her until she eventually became discouraged and could take a step back and realize what she'd been doing. Maybe only then would my words reach her. Until then, all I could do was watch over her as a friend. It was a little vexing, but maybe this was the only thing one could do to influence someone else's life.

"Tell me if things ever get too hard for you. I'll keep the number one spot safe."

Oh, you're on. Do you really think you can get away with that?

"Thanks for your concern, but I think *second* place suits you best."

"Hmph."

I began to understand why having him here felt so comfortable. It's because, just as I'd been watching over Asuhain-san, he'd most likely been watching over me.

Learning How to Live

And thus, the second semester midterms came upon us and ultimately, I was confident that I'd aced the two-daylong test. I wasn't sure how Mizuto did, but at the very least, the other people in our virtual study session didn't look like they were in deep depression or anything. They'd probably done okay.

The biggest problem was Asuhain-san. Now that the midterms were over, the entire student council had gathered together. It was the first time I'd seen Asuhain-san since she'd stormed out of the room.

"I'm feeling great." Asuhain-san puffed out her large chest, a wide smile brimming with confidence on her face as she looked up at me. "I've never felt this good about a test before. I'd be hard-pressed to find any questions I actually struggled with. Irido-san, your reign is over."

Seeing Asuhain-san's confidence, Aso-senpai chimed in. "Heh. The loser always says stuff like that."

"Senpai! That's in fiction! This is reality!"

"But..." Aso-senpai pouted like a child as she ate spoon after spoon of the pudding she'd bought from the convenience store. Apparently it'd been a little gift to herself for completing the midterms.

I looked at Asuhain-san, flashing a cocky grin back at her. "If you're so confident, how about a little wager?" I had a plan, and I was ready to bust it out.

Asuhain-san didn't hesitate even for a second. "Hmph. You're on. You can make me do anything if I lose."

“Hm? *Anything?!*”

“Butt out, Aisa,” President Kurenai said, pulling Aso-senpai back.

“In exchange, when you lose, what will you do?” Asuhain-san asked.

“Hm... How about I share my notes and textbooks with you? I bet they’ll come in handy as references.”

“I see. So you’ll show me your inner workings, so to speak. Fine. We may be enemies, but we’re students in pursuit of the same goal—education. I guess it’s decided; the loser will show their notes and textbooks to the other.”

“Oh, no. If I win, I’m going to have you get eight full hours of sleep every night.” As soon as I declared this, the room fell silent.

“Hm? That’s it? That’s so normal,” Aso-senpai remarked, tilting her head.

Yes, it is...or it would be, if she were normal.

“Wh-What?!” Asuhain-san took a step back and glared at me as if I were some sort of monster.

“Eight hours *every day*?! That’s so much time I’d be losing! Are you trying to steal my study time away from me? You’re trying to solidify your rule at the top?! How dirty! Such a dirty trick!”

“Huh? Hold up. How long do you usually sleep, Ranran?” Aso-senpai asked.

“About four hours!” she boldly answered.

Aso-senpai’s jaw dropped. “*Four* hours? Every day? Seriously? You’re gonna die!”

“There’s nothing to worry about. I’m the type of person who doesn’t need much sleep.”

You really think so? People who don’t need much sleep don’t take naps.

“Well, that’s what’s on the line,” I said, digging my heels in deeper. “You’ll only have to do it until the next test. We can do another bet, and if I win, I’m going to have you sleep eight hours again. It’ll mean you’ll lose four hours or so of study time every day! Like this, I’ll never lose my spot at the top!”

“It doesn’t matter... After all, I’m going to win. Your dirty plan will never come to fruition. You should get your notes ready for me now, while you have a chance!”

I was at the top of our grade.

After school on the day that the rankings were announced, Aso-senpai, President Kurenai, and I peeked at Asuhain-san, who was sleeping on the couch in the student council room. Aso-senpai poked her cute face.

“Phew, I was so scared. I thought she’d faint when she saw the rankings.”

“Most likely, when she saw the results, all the stress that she’d been carrying instantly disappeared and was immediately replaced by fatigue,” President Kurenai said as she put a blanket over Asuhain-san.

The rankings had shaken out with me at number one, Mizuto at number two, and Asuhain-san at number three. The difference between second and third place was ten points. It was a big enough difference that it couldn’t have been written off as a fluke. Mizuto had explained that sleep deficiency puts a huge strain on the brain. He was right. There was no way that either of us would ever lose to someone who was essentially fighting with one arm tied behind their back.

“I hope she actually sleeps eight hours a day...”

“She will. Isn’t that right, Joe?” she said, passing the buck to Haba-senpai, who was sitting at the meeting table.

He glanced at us and nodded. Maybe, despite essentially blending into the background and never really saying anything, he’d been concerned about Asuhain-san, who’d been pushing herself so hard. According to President Kurenai, he observed others more closely than anyone else.

“Maybe she’s so short because she doesn’t sleep? You know what they say, sleeping children grow.”

“That’s an interesting thought. Maybe this is why I haven’t been able to grow at all. Hm, what a conundrum.”

“How much do you sleep?” I asked.

“Three hours. I’m the type who doesn’t need much sleep,” she said plainly.

Aso-senpai and I shot her cold looks. There wasn’t a single sign of fatigue in her face. If anything, she looked *healthier* than the average person. *Who are you, Napoleon?* There really were people who defied all logic, just like Mizuto had said.

That being said, if you convince yourself you’re like that when you’re not, you’ll chip away at your life. Everyone has their own way of living, but whether their body could put up with it or not was a different story.

“Oh? The gang’s all here. That’s rare.” Hoshibe-senpai walked into the room and saw the three of us admiring Asuhain-san as she slept.

He looked rather awkward, perhaps from seeing his underclassman fast asleep on the couch that he usually slept on, but eventually he let out a sigh of relief.

“You did it, Irido.”

“I’m not sure if I did. I don’t know if she’s really taken your words to heart.”

“Hm. Yeah...”

In the first place, he'd told me to *look* after her, and that's exactly what I'd done. Nothing else.

"Hm?" Aso-senpai, hearing our conversation, rubbed against Hoshibe-senpai, smiling. "Oh, did it happen again? Were you being a busybody, Senpai? I bet you made Ranran mad! You care so much about your underclassmen despite not having any way with words!"

"Ah, shaddup. I gotta do *something* or else I'll just be a former member who sticks around and takes up space."

"Isn't that exactly what you are?" President Kurenai chuckled.

"You don't think you are, Senpai?" Aso-senpai smirked.

"Hey, come on, you two!" After being mercilessly dissed by the two second-years, Hoshibe-senpai walked towards the table by the couch and put a paper bag on it.

"What's that?" I asked.

Hoshibe-senpai looked away awkwardly. "An apology for being rude. Give it to Asuhain for me, would ya?"

"What's inside, Senpai?" Aso-senpai asked.

"Dorayaki. Everybody loves red bean paste."

"That's not true, Senpai," Aso-senpai said.

"No... You're kidding."

"I hate to burst your bubble, but my little stepbrother doesn't care for it," I said.

Hearing my real-life example, Hoshibe-senpai began to sweat.

Seeing this, Aso-senpai looked up at him and kept on the attack.

"Senpai, you're *really* insensitive at your core, aren't you?"

"Argh, dammit! Fine! If she doesn't want it, you guys eat it! I don't have anything else!" he cried, quickly exiting the room after Aso-senpai continued to poke fun at him.

"Aw, you're pouting!"

Even if Asuhain-san disregarded the bet we made, if she pushed herself too hard again, I was sure that our kind upperclassmen would give her a good talking-to. This cycle would teach her what it meant to overwork herself. Even if this was the only way she knew how to live, she could learn how to work hard without working herself to death.

No matter how hard Asuhain-san wanted to push herself, no one here would let her get away with it. After all, who couldn't love this cute girl who was so straightforward and stubborn?

Also, as it turned out...Asuhain-san loved the dorayaki. She looked like a chipmunk with the way she stuffed her face with it. It was really soothing to watch, so I couldn't help but mention it.

Just Two Words Aren't Enough

That night, I felt obligated to give Mizuto a report before I talked to him about a separate matter. Mizuto, now with a book in hand instead of a textbook, listened to my report until the very end.

All he had to say in response was, "I see."

I'd expected this exact response from him. I hadn't been deluded into thinking that he'd show some relief or talk at length about his impressions. *Hoshibe-senpai asked me to watch over her, but honestly, it didn't have to be me. Someone else might've been able to do something.*

Aso-senpai, who'd known her the longest, might've been able to force her to sleep. President Kurenai could've maybe had the incredibly perceptive Haba-senpai figure out a solution. If I hadn't gone to Mizuto for help, there was no way I could've made that bet.

Simply winning would've just boxed her more into a corner, making her study even harder, leading to her collapsing. Thinking about what would've happened if I hadn't gone to him for help made me feel a little uneasy but also...supported. It really made me realize how much I'd been relying on Mizuto.

"Hey..." I said as he continued to read.

I need to thank him. But before I could, I found myself swallowing my words. *Is it okay to wrap things up like this? To summarize my feelings in merely two words?* When I thought about it like that, another idea popped into my head.

"There's a day that I'd like you to keep open."

After saying this, Mizuto finally looked up from his book. I'd been thinking about this day for a long time. I'd been thinking about it before midterms and even before the sports festival...probably way before even those.

"When?"

"The next holiday."

Mizuto's eyes slightly widened. The day in question was a special one for both of us, and probably our parents too. It was a day that was more than just a simple holiday for everyone in this house. It was the first holiday of November—the third.

"Keep the day of our birthday open, okay?"

Just a Bit More Like This

Simple Is Best

Mizuto Irido

In what I'm beginning to consider a good memory, I had a so-called girlfriend in eighth and ninth grade. During the first half of that relationship, which was essentially our honeymoon phase, nothing had been more surprising for Yume Ayai and me than the day we told each other our birthdays.

For a naive middle schooler like I, learning that our birthdays fell on the same exact day made our entire relationship feel like fate—almost frighteningly so.

November 3 is the yearly designated Japanese holiday known as Culture Day. Consequently, we'd get the day off from school, which was the main reason the only people we'd ever celebrated our birthdays with were our family. Back then, that worked out in my favor. After all, not only did the first girlfriend of my life have the same birthday as I, but since it was on a national holiday, the two of us could spend the entire day together without having to worry about school.

To be honest, I was never the type to care about my birthday. If anything, more often than not, I'd forget about it entirely until the day of. I mean, it's not like I could remember the moment I was born, nor did I have any real memories of the mother who'd given birth to me. I lacked the components that made a birthday special in one's mind, making it hard for me to care too much about it.

That's why the only time I saw November 3 as special was that one time in middle school. Since neither of us had any experience being in a relationship or buying gifts for other people, we'd decided that, on our birthday, we'd kill two birds with one stone by going on a date in the afternoon and buying a gift for each other at the same time.

Later, I discovered that she had already felt she'd received a gift from me: an eraser I'd given her without much thought. The level of her social awkwardness back then was off the charts, but I digress.

Usually, we'd only ever really go on dates to places that had no real romantic flare, like bookstores or the library. But on our shared birthday, we finally went on what most people would consider a real

date.

We'd ended up going to the mall, which was completely unfamiliar territory for the both of us. Even so, we both had fun looking at various items and asking each other for our thoughts. And yet at the very end of it all, we still found ourselves at a bookstore.

"Oh, look at this book sleeve!" Ayai had said, looking at a display of book accessories instead of the usual bookshelves.

She stared longingly through her glasses at the subdued, pink of a leather book sleeve.

"Want it?"

She looked away, conflicted. "Yeah, I've always wanted a proper sleeve, but..."

"But what?"

"Well... Getting you a book sleeve *was* one of the first things I thought of..."

"Yeah?"

"I thought it was kinda...simple."

I chuckled. "Same."

"Huh?"

"The first thing that came to mind was a book sleeve, but I thought it might be too simple."

Overly self-conscious otakus are seriously so annoying. They'll buy anything and everything for themselves, so why are they so picky about gifts for others? The two of us found this so funny that we started chuckling.

"Well, then. I guess..."

Simple Is Best

Yume Irido

In what I'm beginning to consider a good memory, I had a so-called boyfriend in eighth and ninth grade. Since we shared the same birthday, we'd decided to go out on a date and pick out gifts for each other. Though we'd planned to avoid our typical spots, we still ended up at a bookstore, ogling an assortment of colorful book covers.

Book covers were probably the safest gift that anyone could've gotten for their boyfriend who loved to read. That's why, though it'd been the first thing that came to mind, it'd been the first idea I discarded. It was a very middle schooler-esque gift idea to have. I had absolutely no desire to give him such a simple gift. I got caught up in the mindset that I needed to give him something incredibly thoughtful and romantic, despite being incapable of such ideas. But it seemed that we were on the same page. When I was in the middle of my

thoughts, he reached his hand out.

“Well, then. I guess...” Mizuto had picked up the very same pink book cover that I’d been looking at. “It looks like we both have the same gift in mind.”

I was such a simpleton back then that this made me happier than words could describe. We had the same idea. Our hearts were one. The more that sank in, the more the joy of having Mizuto Irido as my boyfriend did as well.

“Yeah. That sounds...good. So...” This was the only kind of time I felt I could take the initiative. Though I was a spineless coward, I felt like I finally understood him. I sheepishly picked up a black leather book cover. “Would you...like a matching one?”

The colors may have been different, but they were the same brand.

Mizuto chuckled softly. “Oof, the matching couple look.” It was rare for him to joke like that.

“Don’t want to?” I giggled.

“I think it’s pretty cringe to wear matching shirts and stuff, but...this is nice. It really suits us.”

“Yeah!”

Books were the thread that connected us, so it made sense that our first gifts to each other was something book-related. Although, truth be told, that reason was completely an afterthought and just for show.

After that, we’d use our matching book covers everywhere, even at school. Since they were different colors, nobody noticed. It was our little secret. Sometimes we’d even look at each other and covertly smile with our eyes, our classmates none the wiser. It was our way of having fun during the half year or so until we ended up in different classes. To this day, however, I have no idea whether he continued using that book sleeve in his last year of middle school.

The Perfect, Beautiful Girls of the Student Council?

We entered the student council room with our upperclassmen, and the room fell silent. Gathered here were the representatives for various committees, prepared to conduct our second periodic check-in since we’d become the new student council members.

I’d been pretty nervous during our first meeting, but I knew the gist of the proceedings now, so I relaxed a bit. However...I might’ve been imagining it, but I felt like we were getting looks we hadn’t gotten last time.

“Wow... You weren’t kidding.”

“See? Told you. The new student council’s crazy!”

“Talk about high quality...”

“Seeing them up close like this really changes everything!”

The room that had calmed down seconds earlier was now buzzing. They were all doing their best to keep their voices down, but since they were all basically saying the same thing, I could hear them more easily than they’d probably have liked.

I wasn’t sure who’d started it, but apparently there was a rumor that the student council was full of beauties. In all likelihood, this was what all the commotion was about. President Kurenai was charismatic and feminine, Aso-senpai was tall and—as long as you didn’t know the truth—voluptuous, and Asuhain-san was busty yet petite and had a cute face. It made sense that everyone was so taken with them. However, I was *also* being counted as one of these “beauties,” which was a little embarrassing. *Also, they’re obviously ignoring the only male member of the student council, Haba-senpai. He’s as invisible as ever.*

“How superficial...” Asuhain-san hissed.

From the perspective of someone like her who hated guys and romance, these gazes of adoration must’ve been extremely annoying. Was this the cost of fame? I’d thought that the student council wouldn’t be as in the spotlight as they typically were in works of fiction, but it seemed that the shine from President Kurenai illuminated us as well.

“It’s so unfair that they’re all really smart too!”

“I bet they all have boyfriends.”

“They must have fairy-tale romances!”

Yeah, I don’t know about that. I began recollecting a certain incident as a result of hearing these whispers.

November was fast approaching, meaning my shared birthday with Mizuto was just around the corner. It’d been two months since I’d decided to make Mizuto forget all about who I used to be and focus on who I was now. Despite that, I hadn’t made much progress. In the face of this predicament, there was no way I was gonna let such a big event like our birthday slip by me.

I’m going to get him a gift that blows past me’s gift out of the water, and then I’m gonna steal his heart! Or at least, that was the plan. The only problem was that it hinged actually being able to come up with a gift idea, but I still had none. *How does one come up with gift ideas?*

The one-year break after actually being in a relationship had effectively dulled my romantic senses. Even though I knew what having a boyfriend was like, I was in no better position to come up with a gift idea. I couldn’t for the life of me remember what had made him happy. No matter how much I tried to dig through the memories of our relationship, all that came up were memories of a socially

awkward girl who jumped to conclusions and overheated her brain. I couldn't remember a single thing that would make his heart skip a beat.

This left me with no choice but to crowdsource ideas. So when I saw my chance, I asked President Kurenai and Aso-senpai for advice.

"Could I ask something? What, um, did you two do for your crushes' birthdays?" I asked with determination.

The two of them looked at me puzzledly.

"Hm? This is kinda outta the blue, Yumechi. You think I have a crush on someone? I guess the closest thing is Senpai, but he's just a guy I like to toy with. I don't have a *crush* on anyone or anything."

"When you ask a question, you should make sure your assumptions have some credibility to them, Yume-kun. You're implying that I have a crush on someone, but I do not. I suppose the closest thing is a certain classmate of mine who has an abnormally low opinion of himself, which infuriates me to no end. But, as I said, I do not have a *crush* on anyone."

Can we skip the part where you two deny this? As much as I'd like to have said this out loud, I held myself back and continued.

"Sorry. I'll revise my question. Aso-senpai, what did you do for Hoshibe-senpai's birthday? President Kurenai, what did you do for Haba-senpai's birthday? I'm trying to come up with ideas for a guy's birthday, but nothing's really coming to mind."

"Interesting..." Aso-senpai mused. "So you came to us because you need help with a *guy's* birthday present."

"I've no reservations talking to you about this topic," President Kurenai responded. "It's my pleasure to help out my underclassmen in their times of need."

Oh, they seem kinda happy. It might be more fun than I thought to listen to others talk about their romantic experiences. Well, I had thought that, but deep down, I had a strange sense of dread. I should've changed my mind and stopped them from talking any further, but...

"Is it okay if I go first, Suzurin?"

"Sure. Show us how it's done."

Aso-senpai was obviously raring to go. She put her hands together sternly. "So, Senpai's birthday was back in August..."

An Underclassman's One Chance

Aisa Aso

It was the middle of summer, and I was in my room. "It's over..."

I felt like I'd been put in checkmate. I had casually asked Senpai when his birthday was and picked out a present without issue.

Knowing him and his lack of experience with girls, I had no doubt that he'd try to act calm and collected on the outside but freak out on the inside. I was so confident. I could easily fantasize about that situation without breaking a sweat.

But...the problem lay with *how* I was gonna give it to him. It felt, y'know, like everything was over for me. *Okay, it's not the middle of summer. It's in August, towards the end of summer break.* Since we had fewer student council activities to attend, I had fewer opportunities to be around him. Of course, I could easily reach him with a single phone call, but how was I supposed to get someone like him who was dense, coolheaded, and insensitive to come out for his birthday?

In the first place, trying to make arrangements to meet up on someone's birthday isn't all that different from straight-up asking them out. Then, suddenly, in the midst of my thoughts, a certain annoying classmate's words echoed in my head.

"You know Hoshibe-senpai's stepping down soon, right? You should ask him out now while you have the chance," she'd said.

Ugh, she's been really annoying lately. There's absolutely no way in hell I'm gonna ask him out. But...if he asks me out, I guess I wouldn't mind giving it some thought. I exhaled, realizing that I'd fallen into the same thought cycle for the umpteenth time. At this rate, I'd lose my shot and the present I'd bought would just collect dust on my shelf.

"Onee-chan, your room's so, ugh... Don't leave your pads on the floor."

"Little sister, hear me! Your big sister's in the middle of the biggest crisis of her life!"

"Are you not the least bit embarrassed about clinging to your little sister who's four years your junior?!" *Who are you, smacking me with reality?! I don't remember raising you like this!* "Let me guess—it's that guy again. Just go on a date with him or whatever. You're gonna rot in your room like this."

"It's not that easy! High schoolers have it rough in so many ways!"

"Whatever, just leave your room for once. You have plenty of friends to hang out with both from your class and the student council, right?"

"Hanging out with the student council isn't— Ah! That's genius!"

It's not over at all! The heat was just making my brain melt. My little sister sighed as I practically leapt to my bed so I could send a message to the student council LINE group chat.

Aisa: Let's go to the pool, guys!

"Whatcha doin', Senpai?" I asked in a singsong voice, bending my knees and leaning forward to peer up at him.

I used everything I had to calculate the perfect tone and pitch to use on him as he lounged in the pool chair. For someone like me, being in a swimsuit wasn't anything to be scared of at all. With my pronounced cleavage, my boldly exposed waist, and my innocent yet sexy pure-white bikini, I dominated the eyes of everyone gathered...except for him. He continued to lie in the shade of the parasol, his eyes not budging from his phone to even glance at me.

"I was gettin' my login bonus and kinda just ended up farming stages."

"You're in the game company's clutches." Then, I grunted as I positioned myself in the chair next to him.

"Why are you lying next to me?"

"Taking a break. No big deal, right?"

"Guess not..."

I lightly giggled, but hid it behind my slightly closed hand. I spread out and faced him. There was a space between us—a small gap. But still, it kinda felt like...

"Kinda feels like we're sleeping in the same bed, doesn't it?"

After a brief moment of silence, he frowned, a bitter look on his face. *Did your heart skip a beat? Did it? That must be why you look so bitter, right, Senpai?* I couldn't stop myself from mentally giggling. He might have been dense, coolheaded, and insensitive, but sometimes his strong defenses would crumble, and it was so fun to see that happen. I loved it!

In times like these, I felt I could get through his hard exterior—that he'd actually let me in. *Soon, he won't be my upperclassman anymore... I can't believe it.* Graduation was still a ways off, but when the cultural festival ended, he would no longer be on the student council...

I had one chance. One chance as an underclassman to give my upperclassman a birthday present while we were still in the same school. Today was my one and only chance.

"Senpai, want me to put some sunscreen on you?" I asked, sitting up.

"Huh?" His eyes were filled with suspicion. "You tryin' to copy Kurenai and Haba? I don't need sunscreen. I'm not goin' in the water. You just wanna touch me. I'm gonna sue you for sexual harassment."

"Hmph. Then let's go take a dip! Come on!"

"H-Hey, wait!"

I grabbed him by the arm, pulling his huge body to his feet, and forcibly dragged him to the pool.

"H-Hey, stop! It says 'no jumping'!"

"Loosen up! You're not the student council president today. Come on!"

“Whoa!”

I jumped in, back first. The white bubbles rushed by my face, but in between them, I could see him with his eyes shut, like a child. *I’ve never been as thankful as I am now that I can keep my eyes open underwater without goggles.* I wrapped my arms around his neck. In the next moment, his body shot to the surface, pulling me with it.

He gasped for air and used his large hands to wipe his wet bangs from his face. Then, seeing me with my hands around his shoulders, he furrowed his eyebrows.

“You can’t just drag someone who hasn’t even stretched yet into the pool! Huh?” Then he finally realized that there was now a silver necklace around his neck.

I giggled and tilted my head at the perfect angle while giving him my best teasing smile. “Almost like a collar, isn’t it, Senpai?”

My present to him was that necklace.

And Now, the Punch Line

Yume Irido

“Wow!” I’d honestly expected a recounting of how she’d ultimately messed up, but the story she told was more wonderful than I ever could’ve imagined. I was seriously touched. “Wow, that’s so amazing! Seriously?! That was so amazing! You did it while pulling him into the pool?! Whoa, you’re sooo amazing!”

“Heh heh. Witness your master’s power and revere me!”

“You *can* really get things done when you have to!”

“Uh...why are you making it sound like I mess up most of the time?”

Her story was so touching that I accidentally let my true thoughts slip out. *But seriously. Phew, that’s the kind of teenage story I admire.*

While Master chuckled with pride as I trembled in her majesty, President Kurenai apathetically looked at her.

“Aren’t you forgetting the punch line to that story?”

“Huh?” *What punch line?*

President Kurenai looked tired as she rested her face in her hands. “After that, you realized that your pads had fallen out from the impact of falling into the pool, and—”

“Stop! La la la! I can’t hear you! That never happened!”

“Master...” *I’d like a refund on the admiration I paid you. Also, how could she not have expected that to happen?*

“Anyway, you’re next, Suzurin!”

“Sheesh... It’s unfortunate having such an unreliable vice president. It would seem that I’ve more work to do now. How

troublesome. I suppose I've no choice but to fulfill my presidential duties."

"Oh, barf! You're as annoying as emergency maintenance in games!"

President Kurenai, however, looked wholly unperturbed and began leisurely speaking. "Truth be told, Joe's birthday is a very suitable day for him..."

No Matter Where You Hide in This World...

Suzuri Kurenai

It was early January, and winter break had just begun.

"It was last week."

"Huh?" I froze hearing the answer to the question that I'd nonchalantly asked.

"My birthday was January 5—last week."

Suddenly, I broke out into a sweat—something I hadn't done in years. Joe—Joji Haba—was a guy with little to no presence. He easily melted into the background of the classroom, and even teachers would forget his name.

But that was just in general. No matter how little presence he had, he couldn't escape *my* eyes. Ever since we had entered this school and ended up in the same class, I'd never forgotten about him. I always had my eye on him. Even if nobody else could do that, I knew I could.

So how was it that despite that, I didn't know when his birthday was? All I had to do was casually ask him about it, but I never did. It was basic information written on his student ID. There was no way I'd overlooked it...and yet I had. Despite me being able to remember every last word that was said during our classes, *that* information had somehow slipped through the cracks.

"You don't have to worry that much," he said, not seeming even a little bit bothered. "My birthday's right after the first three days of the new year—right around the time people get tired of saying 'happy New Year.' Even my parents forget my birthday—there's no helping how forgettable it is. I'm already used to it, so it doesn't bother me one bit. Don't get so down on yourself, Kurenai-san."

You're...used to it? There's no helping it? Are you stupid?! "Joe, listen. Just for this year, your birthday is today."

"Huh?" Joe looked at me with confusion.

"Let's go buy you a present. Now!"

And that's how I dragged Joe out into the frigid January air. We waited at the bus stop by the school, hopped on the bus heading to the

shopping district, and after a few minutes of being rocked back and forth, we arrived at the lively streets of commerce. We practically had no choice but to be swept away by the wave of people.

"Is there anything you want? I've got a lot saved up from my jobs, so you don't have to worry about price," I asked him, blowing out clouds of white through my scarf.

Joe, who was wearing a coat over his school uniform, pulled up his collar. "Nothing, really. Anyway, I'd feel bad asking you to buy me something with your hard-earned money."

"It's a present. There's nothing to feel bad about."

"Isn't the gift-giver usually the one who decides what to give?"

Oh. Is that how it goes? "In that case, I simply must decide what I want to get you myself. Heh heh. I have a great idea."

"I'm getting a bad feeling, so you know what, I think I'll take my leave..."

"Whoa there. You're not going anywhere," I said, wrapping my arm around his, making sure he had nowhere to run.

"What are you—"

"No matter what anyone says, today is your birthday. That means I've an obligation to celebrate it," I said, gripping his arm tighter.

He tried to lean away from me a little. "Kurenai-san... You should know certain *parts* are touching me."

"Of course they are. It's normal for girls to want their boobs to touch the body of the guy that they're into."

"I don't think that's true..."

I could've sworn that I saw a glimmer of embarrassment on his expressionless face. Thinking of how I was stirring emotion within him from the small movements of my arm made me kinda happy. If he really saw himself as part of the background, then he should've done a better job at restraining his emotions.

"Well then, let's be off. I know a good place." I moved my face close to his as he spaced out before intertwining our fingers, making him gasp. "For the record, this isn't part of your present."

His eyes flew in the opposite direction of mine. *Even after all this, that's all I get from you? You seriously are a troublesome guy, you know that?*

"I think you have a problem more pressing than your lack of presence," I said as I picked out various articles of clothing off a rack and rested them on his shoulder. "There's nothing you can do about your natural, plain appearance. However, it's possible to customize how others perceive you. Improving the way you dress will certainly lead to you having more of a presence!"

"You're just wasting your time..."

“Don’t count me out. I’m gonna break you out of the background!”

Ten or so minutes later, I was holding my head outside of the fitting room.

“Hmm...” *Well, this is a conundrum. He really is a troublesome guy.*

I’d tried everything from extremely flashy clothes to fashionable clothes with more subdued colors. To my horror, none of them suited him whatsoever. *Who are you?!* The simple wish of trying to get him looking somewhat trendy resulted in him looking like an overgrown middle schooler. The only clothes that might’ve looked good on him were the random clothes that moms would buy their kids. If anything, the student uniform, which had zero individuality to it, looked best on him so far.

“Satisfied yet, Kurenai-san?”

“No, not yet! Just hold on! I’ll think of something soon! I’m gonna come up with the perfect outfit that will bring you into the spotlight!”

Joe took off the hat I’d given him. “I don’t really care if anyone notices me or not,” he said expressionlessly, making it hard to know what was going through his head.

“There you go again. Listen—”

But as I said this, Joe made a troubled expression and looked at me. “Wanting any more than this is a luxury I can’t afford.”

My brain that could answer any problem or any equation thrown at it was having trouble identifying the emotion gripping my heart at that moment. *What does he mean by “this”?* But maybe I didn’t have to wonder too hard. From his gaze, I could tell that he meant me. *How can you be so...free of desire? I’m nothing special. I’m simply a little more arrogant than the average person. But...*

“Kurenai-san?”

I looked away from him. *Stop. Don’t look at me. If you see me right now, I’ll never be the same Suzuri Kurenai that you know.* I hid my mouth with my scarf and steadied my breathing.

I hated those who didn’t know their own strength. However, I hated those who refused to try and recognize their own strength even more. That’s why I wouldn’t give up. *I’m going to keep going until you finally recognize your own worth. But for now...if you say that I’m good enough for you, then I’ll stop here for today.*

“Let’s go.”

“Huh?”

“You need to change.”

After making him change back into his uniform, I pulled him by the hand out of the store and to a different floor. Our destination? A phone shop. I walked towards the accessories area and we stood in front of the case.

“Which one do you think is most like me?”

“Huh? Uh...” Joe was lost, but eventually pointed towards a sky-blue phone case. “This...probably.”

“I’ll take it,” I said, grabbing the case.

“This...isn’t going to be my gift, is it?”

“It is. This size okay?”

“Yeah, but...”

“Good.” We went to the cashier and checked out. Then, I put the case in Joe’s hands. “This is the case that you think is most like me.”

“Uh...so?”

“So, I want you to think of it as a replacement for me.” I moved my face closer to his as he blinked with bewilderment. “That way, no matter when it is or where you are, only I’ll be able to look at you, right?”

Even if nobody around noticed you, I would be there, watching you. “If that’s not good enough, you can call me. No matter where you hide in this world, I’ll find you using this brain that people consider a prodigy’s,” I said, jokingly, flashing Aisa’s patented femme fatale smile. “In other words, *I’m* your birthday present. Do with me as you wish.”

And Now, The Punch Line

Yume Irido

“Wow...” Her story was a different kind of wonderful than Aso-senpai’s. I couldn’t help but exhale in amazement. “You really try to act cool around Haba-senpai, don’t you?”

“Hold on. You’re making it sound as if I’m not always like that.”

“I’ve never heard anyone say the line ‘I’m your birthday present’ as coolly as you did!”

“Indeed. That’s precisely right,” she said, nodding proudly.

Aso-senpai lay her head in her hands and stared at President Kurenai. “Um...aren’t you forgetting the messy bits?”

“Hm?”

“If I remember right, you were texting up a storm after that because Joe-kun was all like, ‘I’m happy you feel that way, but that’s a little *much* for me.’”

“Nope! Didn’t happen!”

Well, that makes sense. It’s a little much for a girl you’re not even dating to offer themselves as a present. It’ll also be extremely obvious if he doesn’t use the phone case.

“In that case, isn’t it a lot for a girl to give a guy they’re not even dating a neckl—”

“Hm? That’s weird. I could’ve sworn I heard something coming

out of your mouth, Yumechi...”

“Nope. Nothing.”

I wasn’t thinking about how at the very least, a phone case had a lot more practical use than a necklace. Not at all!

“In the first place,” Aso-senpai began, folding her arms angrily, “it’s pretty impudent of the giftee to complain! Regardless of how ‘much’ or ‘little’ it is, they should be crying tears of joy!”

“Well said, for once, Aisa. Going back even further, the guys of the student council are too passive. Despite society striving for diversity and gender equality, it’d be nice once in a while for the guys to show a little backbone.”

“Hard agree! Are his muscles just for show?! At least shove me against a frickin’ wall once in a while!”

They were getting out of control with their grievances. All I could do was awkwardly smile as they went back and forth about their desires and complaints.

And Now, the Punch Line of the Punch Line

The following day, I was still no closer to figuring out what to get Mizuto for his birthday. When I walked into the student council room, I saw Hoshibe-senpai taking a nap on the couch and Haba-senpai working.

That’s when I noticed a silver necklace peeking out from Hoshibe-senpai’s shirt and a sky-blue case on Haba-senpai’s phone. They looked clean, like they’d been taken good care of. *I think they might deserve a little more credit.* I had a feeling that they’d reward the feelings of their respective gift givers sooner or later.

Thinking about that, I remembered what I’d heard from Aso-senpai and President Kurenai the other day. If it was hard to get the person alone, I could invite them as part of a group. All I had to do was give him a gift that I wanted to give him. *Okay. In that case...*

A Family Birthday

Mizuto Irido

Yume had told me to keep the day of our birthday open. Honestly, I’d expected it. I didn’t feel like myself anymore. It was as if I’d gone back to how innocent I used to be in middle school with how much I was anticipating this. Was she gonna take me on a date? Was she gonna have us get dressed up and exchange gifts like when we dated? In actuality, reality practically laughed in my face.

“Happy birthday!” Yuni-san, my stepmother, said with a bright,

cheerful expression. "Choose whichever cake slice you want. I splurged a bit and got an assortment of expensive ones!" She placed a rectangular box in front of us.

"The original idea was to get a whole cake, but then when we actually looked at them, we realized they were too big," dad said.

"Yeah, we got kinda worried we couldn't finish it all. Also, I'm sure that Yume's getting to the age where she's worrying about calories."

"Sorry to disappoint, but I've yet to diet," Yume said facetiously.

"So jealous!" Yuni-san sounded almost like a child.

Yume opened the box with the cakes and looked inside. "I'll take this chocolate one then!" She carefully pulled out a brown cake.

"What about you?" she asked, pushing the box to me.

She's acting like nothing's wrong. What was all that about me keeping today open? Why'd she been so cryptic about it? Did she really ask me to keep today open just so we could celebrate with our family? Why the hell had I been sweating all day, then?!

"I'll take the cheesecake."

I didn't show how bitter I felt inside. I understood the logic. She probably thought that I'd skip out on birthday festivities without a second thought. She could've at least been honest about her plans! What was the point of being so cryptic about this?! Just spit it out next time!

"And here are your birthday presents," dad said, giving me and Yume each a small envelope—the kind that people would get for New Year's. "Don't worry, Yuni-san and I got you kids different gifts."

"Thank you! Can I open it?"

"It's nothing special," dad said to Yume. "Just ten thousand yen's worth of gift cards you can use at a bookstore of your choice."

"Huh?!"

Yume opened the envelope and pulled out about ten cards. I was pretty used to seeing these already.

"Ten thousand yen..."

"Apparently that's what he does every year," Yuni-san said.

"Boring, right?"

"Aw, can you blame me? Mizuto loves it," dad insisted.

"I-I really like it too! I'm seriously happy! Thank you so much!" Yume beamed.

I could see millions of possibilities of books she could buy flying around in her head. With that much money, you'd be set on books for a while. The gift was probably especially useful for Yume since she had a tendency to buy more expensive books.

"It's my turn! Here Yume, you first!"

Yuni-san brought a bottle out of her bag and put it in front of

Yume.

“Perfume?” Yume asked, picking it up.

“Yep! It’s the expensive, adult kind! I thought I should give my daughter something to match how much of a little temptress she’s becoming!”

“I-I am? Is that what it looks like?”

“Yep! You must be quite the heartthrob at school! Oh, my daughter, the heartthrob!”

“N-No, I’m not...”

Yume’s definitely being modest here. She’d gone up from being just the top student in our grade to also being a member of the student council of beauties. Not a day went by that I didn’t hear someone talking about her. Kawanami and Minami-san had been complaining to me about how there were more people thinking about asking her out and how they wished that they were more considerate to them, the people who had to shut them down. But also, what were the two of them doing behind the scenes?

“And this is for you, Mizuto-kun!” Yuni-san said, standing up and going to the corner of the room to bring over something round.

“Is it a cushion?”

“Yep! A beanbag chair!” She pushed her hand into it as if to demonstrate its softness. “I think it’ll level up your reading experience! Just be careful not to use it too much. If you get too hooked on it, you’ll never leave the house again.”

I knelt in front of the cushion and pressed my hand into it to check the softness. *Oh... This feels nice. I think Isana would enjoy this gift more than I, though.*

“Thank you very much,” I said. “I’ll be sure to use it an appropriate amount.”

“Good! Make sure you tell Higashira-san about it too!”

Oh god, she knows how often Isana comes over.

“Wow, that’s so nice. I kinda wish I had one too,” Yume peeked at it from behind.

“Why don’t you ask Mizuto if you can use it every now and then?” dad suggested.

“No, the only girl I can think of who could actually go into a boy’s room and sit in it without reserve is Higashira-san,” Yuni-san said with a laugh.

“Aw, why not? Yume doesn’t have to be reserved. After all, they’re siblings!”

Siblings...huh? The time we spent as a family, the times that I’d been made acutely aware that she’s a girl—both of them comprised my life, but sometimes it got hard to separate the two. *I know I want to be by your side.* I couldn’t deny that this desire existed within me any

longer. The problem was...how was I going to go about achieving that? I still had no idea.

An Inevitable Meeting

“Mom! You’re drinking too much...”

“I’m fiine!” she slurred with a drunken giggle.

“If you’re gonna sleep, do it in your bed, okay?”

It was rare to see Yuni-san so drunk. Dad silently tilted his glass and smiled gently as he watched Yume put Yuni-san’s arm around her neck and carry her away.

“She must’ve been so happy to celebrate with the four of us.”

“Because our birthdays are coincidentally on the same day?” I asked.

Dad’s eyebrows lowered slightly. “Hm, I’m not sure I would write this off as a coincidence. Maybe it is, but you could also call it...inevitable.”

“Huh?”

“You know, cause and effect. The world’s...so well put together.” Dad was pretty tipsy too, but his eyes were focused. It was almost as if he was looking out into the distance. “Now that I think about it, I never told you how Yuni-san and I met, did I?”

“You told me it was through work.” *I’m pretty sure that’s how he explained it to me when he told me about his remarriage.*

Dad slightly shook his head. “That was the trigger for us getting married, but...truth be told, we met much earlier.”

“Oh, really?”

“At the hospital. The one where you both were born.”

I hadn’t really been giving him my full attention until then and had only been giving half-hearted responses as if on autopilot, but this made my ears perk up. *Did he say the hospital where we were both born? We were born at the same hospital?*

“Surprising, isn’t it? But it’s not too crazy when you think about it. After all, we lived in the same town and you two were born on the same day. It makes sense. You don’t remember it, of course, but the two of you were in the same nursery when you were born sixteen years ago.”

He has a point. I guess it’s not all that crazy. The two of us had gone to the same middle school, which meant that we’d been in the same school district. Our houses hadn’t even been that far away from one another’s. Taking all that into account, it wasn’t strange whatsoever that we’d been born in the same hospital.

“On that day, Kana...your mother was teetering between life and death. I was a mess—completely lost in the dark. I couldn’t even

picture ten seconds into the future. I couldn't focus on work. All I could do was idle away at the hospital. But that's when a woman who was passing by called out to me."

"And that was Yuni-san?"

"Right. She'd just given birth to Yume-chan." Dad awkwardly smiled. "I swear to you that I didn't cheat or anything, okay? We didn't even exchange names. All we did was share the burdens on our minds. She was worried about how her husband was so focused on work that he didn't even try to attend the birth of his own child. Despite that, she saw me in worse shape than she was and couldn't just leave me be. According to her, I had a look on my face as if the world had just ended." Yume had told me before that Yuni-san's ex-husband had always been working. Apparently, it had gotten to the point where it was almost like he was just renting a room in their house. "Yuni-san told me that though she had no clue how things would turn out with her home situation, as soon as she saw her child's face, she started getting excited for the future. After that, I went to look at your face, and I started to feel a little courage to face tomorrow. If I hadn't, I might've resented you after being left behind by Kana."

"*Left behind.*" All this time, I'd just taken my past as a matter of fact, but now, I felt paralyzed by it. The one thing I never wanted to experience was being left behind.

"So in a sense...Yuni-san is my savior." The ice in his glass clinked. "After fifteen years of desperately working while raising a child, I felt like I could finally process what happened with Kana. Just when I did, I was reunited with that savior of mine. I knew at first glance that if I was going to marry someone else, it could only be her." Dad was beginning to look like his focus was slipping. His eyelids hung heavy. "That's why...I'm happy that...the four of us could spend today as a family. I'm so...so happy."

His head slowly but surely drooped until he fell to the table, fast asleep. It was rare for him to drink so much that he'd get like this. He wasn't kidding when he'd said today was special for both him and Yuni-san.

"Hm? Did he pass out?" Yume asked as she came back to the living room and heard his soft breathing.

"Yeah. Sorry, could you grab a blanket?"

"Sure."

Yume left and came back with a blanket and draped it over his shoulders. With this, our birthday celebration was over. Now that our parents were asleep, the two of us took it upon ourselves to clean up the dishes.

"Hey..." I started, but ultimately decided against finishing.

As it turned out, us becoming siblings might not have had anything to do with our destiny. Rather, perhaps we were being strung along by the red string of fate that tied our *parents* together. They'd met because of their children. It was inevitable that they'd ended up together. Maybe the only trap that fate had laid for us had been our meeting in the middle school library.

"What?" Yume asked, turning around.

"Make sure to put the leftover cake in the fridge."

"Huh? Yeah, I know..."

There was probably no reason to mention any of this. Fate, destiny... It didn't matter. The two of us had something we needed to protect. Keeping that in mind and determining what to do next was something that I'd have to figure out by myself.

Pointless Small Talk Can Calm the Heart

My eyes fell to my desk as I entered my room. On top of it was a small, wrapped gift. As I touched it, an image of Yume flashed through my head, reminding me of how she'd spent our entire birthday celebration as if nothing had been wrong—as if she hadn't made a point of telling me to leave today open for some mysterious reason.

It's almost as if we're back in middle school and I'm once again getting all excited and then depressed by myself. Though I'd been so sure I'd grown out of that confused phase, before I knew it, I'd regressed. *Am I really back where I started? If I am, and I get what I want, and Yume and I do end up dating again...doesn't that just mean things will end in ruin like they did before? No, it'd be even worse.* Our breakup wouldn't affect just us anymore.

"Hm?" My phone started vibrating in my pocket. *Isana?* "Hello?"

"Greetings! Happy birthday!"

Hearing her carefree voice made me relax a little. "You knew? I don't remember ever telling you."

"This information was received courtesy of Yume-san. I'll present you with your gift at school tomorrow."

"You got me a present? Not like you to follow convention."

"Which would you prefer, a swimsuit version or bunny girl version?"

"Forget it. Scrap whatever you're working on."

"Oh, come on! I've already completed the preliminary sketches...of Yume-san in both a swimsuit and a bunny suit."

"You drew *her*?! Delete those sketches *now*!"

And here I was sure that she was trying to offer cosplay options for herself to come in. *Please never give anyone a birthday gift if that's*

the kind of thing you're cooking up.

"Well, jokes aside..." Isana said with a chuckle.

"You could stand to make your jokes a little more obvious..."

"Have you already given her a gift? I'm certain you prepared one, didn't you?"

I looked down at the small gift by my hand. "Yeah...I got her one."

"Oh? Judging by your choice of words, does that mean you haven't—"

"Yeah, I haven't given it to her yet," I snapped. "What's the big deal? We live in the same house. I've got a million chances to give it to her."

"You say that, but time will pass you by in an instant and before you know it, it'll already be next year! Heed my words: you don't want to end up with a desk overflowing with presents you couldn't give out!" Why are you making me imagine something so horrible? *I guess even I can't deny that things could end up that way.* "If it doesn't seem as though you're going to give it to her, I will step in and drop some hints to Yume-san," Isana threatened. "It'll be similar to the method that some employ—requesting a friend to ask your crush out for you. Are you willing to taint such a special event with such a lame type of inaction?"

"Okay, stop. This is hitting way too close to home." It was frightening to even imagine. If that situation ever came to fruition, I'd probably run away from home.

"Out of curiosity, is it okay if I ask what you got her?"

"It's not anything flashy like an accessory. Giving that to someone when you're not even dating is kind of a lot."

"Oh, so is it a gift of the practical variety? You little chicken."

I internally cursed, knowing that she'd hit the nail on the head. I really hated how she phrased the truth in such nasty ways.

"Yeah, so?! The more important thing is that I'm actually giving her a gift!"

"Oh, yes. It is *much* better as the receiver of the gift to simply awkwardly smile while you receive it and then later be fraught with thoughts of what to actually do with the gift."

"Did I kill your family or something?"

"Well, no, my sharp words most likely have more to do with the fact that you didn't accept my proposal of courtship."

"I might have put myself in your debt for the rest of my life by doing that..." I had a feeling that she wouldn't ever let go of what I'd done.

Isana giggled. "Well, at any rate, you should go off and create a good atmosphere with Yume-san. She can have you today. I'm content

waiting until tomorrow for your company.”

“Are you trying to make it sound like I’m cheating?”

“It really gets the blood flowing when I imagine being your mistress,” Isana giggled.

“Yeah, my heart’s beating faster, but not for the reason you’re thinking. But how am I supposed to create a good atmosphere?”

“You speak as if you’re a novice in the matter. Have you not been in a relationship with her before?”

“Things...are different now.”

“Then allow me to provide my fantasy situation! During your chat after you bed each other, you—”

I hung up before she could finish her sentence. *Your assumptions are wrong—like, all wrong.* I put my phone down and looked at the gift again. Thanks to talking to Isana with her carefree and random statements, I felt much more relaxed. I could actually feel my brain working again.

I was right. Things were different now. Why overthink it? All I had to do was give her the present. I didn’t need to worry about the specifics or doing anything special. As I’d said, the important thing wasn’t the gift but the act of giving it.

“Okay,” I said, making up my mind and picking up the small package.

Suddenly, I heard a knock at my door. “You in there?”

The Desire That Can’t Fit into Just a Few Words

The door opened, and there stood Yume in her pajamas. “I’m coming in.”

“H-Hey!”

Yume didn’t hesitate at all and swiftly entered my room. Her eyes immediately fell on the cushion that I’d received from Yuni-san, and she jumped onto it without even asking.

“Oh, this is a good cushion. I wish I’d gotten one too.”

“What about the rule against going into each other’s room at night?”

Hadn’t we come up with this rule to avoid causing our parents any concern? I could’ve sworn we’d both agreed to contact each other over the phone if we really needed something.

Yume looked up at me and grinned. “It’s okay. They’re both drunk and passed out. If you’d like, we could forgo our usual sibling rules, Onii-chan.”

“Oh, right. Our sibling rules. It’s been a while since those have been mentioned...” She hadn’t invoked them during the incident in the bath, so I thought she’d forgotten.

Yume scooched over. "There's room for one more, y'know."

"Huh? What are you trying to—"

"Can't you indulge your little sister's whims, Onii-chan?"

"If that's how you try to use the rules, then there's no point to them anymore!"

"Just get over here!"

"Agh!" Yume forcibly pulled me by the wrist, making me land in the spot next to her.

This cushion was only designed for one person, so it was a tight fit. Our shoulders were pressed against one another's. I could smell the sweet scent of soap from her.

"Does this count as sibling-like?" I asked as I moved as far to the edge of the cushion as possible.

Yume moved closer, as if she was following me. "Of course. They were like this in *Grave of the Fireflies*."

Regardless of whether you're referencing the novel or the movie, I'm positive that the siblings weren't pressing their bodies against each other while sitting in the comfort of a beanbag chair like this.

Then, a silence fell between us. Despite her out-of-character, forceful behavior, she still had yet to state why she'd come here. We sat there for a minute, our shoulders touching, increasing my awareness of her body warmth and her softness. I was starting to think that this would last forever, but that foolish thinking didn't last long, because in the next moment, Yume opened her mouth.

"Happy...birthday."

"Y-Yeah. You too." *Huh? Why now? We just finished celebrating.*

"I...got you a...present." She was speaking slowly as if she was taking time to choose her words carefully. It took me a while to process what she'd said. "I actually got it a while ago, but I thought that if I gave it to you earlier, our parents would've figured it out from my behavior. So...here I am giving it to you in the eleventh hour."

I flashed a glance at the clock, which read eleven o'clock. There was less than an hour left of our birthdays.

Yume rummaged behind her back and pulled out a wrapped gift. *Wait, have you been hiding that this entire time? Is that why you wanted to sit on the cushion?*

"Here," she said curtly, handing me the gift.

I accepted it mostly out of reflex. It was a nicely wrapped package that fit snugly in my palm. Putting it another way, it was book-sized. I glanced to the side and saw that Yume's eyes were cast downwards at her knees. Despite how much time we'd spent together, I had no clue what was going through her head or what she was feeling.

"Can I open it?" I asked hesitantly.

Yume slightly nodded, so I proceeded to carefully unwrap it. At

the end of it all, I saw something I was incredibly familiar with. *It's a book sleeve.* Not just that, it was a stunning navy blue.

"I..." It was hard not to remember this. It was the same thing that I'd bought her for her birthday back in middle school. The color and design may have been slightly different, but...

"I've been thinking..." Yume began speaking while gazing at the ceiling. "More than not, you're coming to my rescue. If it weren't for you, I might have never gotten the last push I needed to join the student council. I told myself that I'd stop relying on you, but...then I realized just how much you've been supporting me." It was almost hard to believe how honest she was being. Her words flowed out of her mouth, washing over me like a cool, refreshing stream. "You might hate me for it, and that's okay. But even so, I want to thank you for all the support you've given me. If it's okay...I'd like it if you continued to do so, but not as your ex, or your sibling... I can't really find the words to say what I want."

No, I get it. Hearing that she was thinking the same as I would've made my past, simpleton mind ecstatic. I'd be overjoyed that we were thinking the same thing, that our hearts were one. *But that's not how it is anymore. Neither of us is the same simpleton we used to be.*

Complicated emotions would swirl around our heads like a whirlpool. It didn't matter how many books we read, we'd never find the right words to describe our thoughts. But even so...

"I...wanted to give you a new one," she said, clearly stating her desire. "I figured you threw away the last one I got you, but either way...I want you to use the one I'm giving you now. Not the old one." She kept her shoulder fastened against mine.

She isn't running away. She's using the gift as a vehicle to directly push her desires onto me. Some might have interpreted this as selfish with how the present she gave didn't seem to take the recipient's feelings into account whatsoever, but... *Oh, I see. That's right. We're way past the point where we need to be considerate of each other.*

"I..." After making up my mind, I began speaking, surprising Yume, and making her tremble slightly. "I-I'm okay with forgoing our sibling rules today too, Nee-san."

What about the Future?

Yume Irido

"Huh?"

I looked to my side, where Mizuto stretched out to his desk and grabbed a small packaged gift. It was small enough that it could fit in my palm—about the size of a book. *No way, right?*

“Here,” he said, offering it to me. “Happy birthday.”

As soon as he dropped it in my hand, I was filled with disbelief.

“H-Huh? I-Is this—”

“Just open it.”

I nervously unwrapped the gift and found exactly what I’d expected inside—a red book cover.

“I didn’t expect us to get each other the same gift.” Seeing how I was speechless from all the emotions welling up inside me, he exhaled. “For the record, there’s no meaning behind it like with your gift. This was just...the first thing that came to mind.”

“Wh-Why? D-Don’t you remember what happened in the past?!”

“Of course I remember.” He frowned, almost like he was offended. “I wasn’t sure if this was the right direction to go. I was worried you might not like it because it’d give the impression that I’m bogged down by unresolved feelings. But the more I thought about it, the more I couldn’t think of anything but this. You’re going all over the place because of your duties on the student council, and I’m sure you’re carrying a book with you when you do. It’d be easy for it to get damaged. I figured it’d be hard to use something your ex got you, so there shouldn’t be any issue with you having two of them.”

Oh...I see. I’d given him the book sleeve because I’d wanted to, but Mizuto had chosen his gift with my well-being in mind.

“Thanks...” I held the book cover in a slightly different color than the one I’d gotten two years ago against my chest. “I’ll be careful with it.”

“Don’t be. It didn’t break the bank or anything. I’ll just buy you a new one if it gets damaged.”

“So...you’ll buy one for me next year too?”

“Next year? How badly are you treating it that you’ll need a replacement in a year?” Seeing me giggle, he looked down at the book cover I’d gotten him. “Thanks for this. I’m surprisingly happy with it.”

“Which one made you happier? This one or the one I gave you back then?”

“They’re about the same...I think.”

The same? Then I guess I need to try just a little harder. “I’m gonna make you eat those words next year.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Just a little more. I’ve just about got your death warrant signed, past me. I’m going to surpass you for sure. Just watch.

I’m a Coward

Mizuto Irido

After that, we each read a book on the cushion in order to get a feel for our presents. Eventually, I felt a weight on my shoulder. I glanced over and saw that Yume was leaning her head on my shoulder and letting out soft breaths as she dozed off.

“Really? Sheesh...”

It was past midnight by now. Our birthday had come and gone. She usually didn’t stay up this late. *Fine. I’ll have to think about how to get her to her bed. But...* I quieted my breathing as I looked at Yume through her bangs. It felt the same. I was just as happy as I’d been back when we were dating. *I can’t believe my feelings have already gotten this intense.*

In the past, I thought that romance was just a flight of fancy. But now, I knew that this...*this* wasn’t anything of the sort. I was so certain of my feelings. Just as dad knew Yuni-san was the one he wanted to remarry when they were reunited, I knew that there was nobody else but her for me.

I’ll admit it. I’m not going to hide behind words anymore, at least not in my head. I love you, and because I love you, I want to be by your side. That’s why we can’t stay as just siblings. I extended my finger towards Yume’s bangs. *Don’t wake up.* I brushed my knuckle through her bangs. *Do you think I’m being a coward for finding my resolve but being content with this situation? You’ll never know how I only have the courage to touch you like this when you’re asleep. But even so, I can’t help but think about how stupid I’m being, procrastinating. I’m just a coward. An emotionally immature coward. But even so, I...*

I’m a Coward

Yume Irido

Do you think I’m being a coward for finding my resolve but being content with this situation? Am I a coward for pretending to be asleep and waiting for you to touch me like this? Is it bad of me to not be the one trying to make the move? But even so, I can’t help but think about how stupid I’m being, procrastinating. I’m just a coward. An emotionally immature coward. But even so, I...want to stay like this a little longer.



Afterword Plus the Revival of My Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

The previous volume and the volume before that were chock-full of themes that even I thought were complicated and difficult, so I thought that this volume could go back to the roots of this series as a nice, laid-back, traditional rom-com. This way, it'd also match how the environment around Yume has changed.

The subtitle is very accurate in that I want to see a little more of their status as people who have mutual one-sided crushes on each other. There's absolutely no shame in wanting to play it out a little longer. Anyway, please enjoy my thoughts on each chapter of the novel.

The Person I Like Lives with Me

This was about two people who began to live in completely different worlds and yet, there was something that still connected them. I considered a lot of different guy-girl ratios for the student council, but my reasoning for the members ended up being pretty simplistic. Essentially, I realized that Haba-kun's more often than not just part of the background, so I decided that an all-girl student council would be fine.

Overall, I really enjoy writing groups of four or five girls. For example, it's pretty fun to write about cute girls doing cute things. But I wanted to write about couples, so I knew I had to add a certain ex-student council member into the mix.

The end result was that the only ex-student council member that didn't appear was the one in charge of general affairs. I wonder if they'll pop up sometime. We learned a lot about the president but nothing at all about this mysterious former general affairs officer. Doesn't that make them seem kinda powerful?

Oh, and I'd like to point out that we ran out of room for illustrations. Normally, we'd put one in the manga café scene, but it is what it is. It's just yet another of the various difficulties of light novels. By the way, fan art is very welcome!

I Want to Make You Blush

How many times have we had a story in which Yume goes on the offensive in nothing but a towel? Well, whatever. It's a good situation and you can never overuse good situations.

While writing this, I began thinking that for rom-coms, it's more hilarious when the protagonists are all idiots. I realized that Mizuto's IQ in the previous volume was too high. Starting this volume onwards, I'll make him a fun idiot. You're all gonna love it!

Aisa's the type of character I *really* like, so I hope you all enjoyed how she acted in this chapter. I wonder why it is that people who have no success to speak of like to give advice to others.

The Way You See Me

Yay, sports festival. If you can't tell, that's sarcasm. It's an event that I personally couldn't care less about. I'd even considered skipping over it entirely, but I backtracked when I realized that a treasure hunt's a thing. Oh, and the rules by which participants can switch their prompt is something that I came up with. I have no clue if it actually exists anywhere.

Just as Yume is interacting with a new community, Mizuto and Isana interact with Nasuka and Maki. The reason for this is mostly just for fun.

If Yume had been in the mix, there would've been seven of them there. It's hard to write that many characters at once, so I hope they don't all hang out together too much more. Well, I guess Mizuto and Isana ended up in a world of their own, so at least for them, the environment wasn't too different from usual.

TakayaKi is *really* good at drawing undergarments, so I've been waiting for the chance to have one of those illustrations, and I finally had the chance to do so. And then, Isana's bra broke... Come on, girl...

Because You Watch over Me

Despite this being a lighthearted rom-com, this is where I figured I should tone that down and dial up the seriousness a bit. Asuhain-san is the only one on the student council who's easy to respect. After all, she's different from all the other members who are obsessed with love but suck at getting results. I have absolutely no plans of changing her hatred for guys!

On a similar note, this won't be the only glimpse you'll get of Aisa's little sister. I fully plan on writing something with her. Oh, right. I almost forgot. Aisa's little sister is the very same androphobic middle schooler who appeared at the cultural festival. Should be obvious, right? Both of them have the same hairstyle.

Just a Bit More Like This

It's the long-awaited birthday story! November 3, aka 11/3. Two prime numbers, right next to each other. In other words, they're impossible to divide.

I also used this chapter to resolve the untold stories about what the student council members had been doing up until summer. It's nice how proud Aisa and Suzuri tried to act about their feats. It would've been nice to see them in their swimsuits and winter clothes, but as stated before, there wasn't enough space for illustrations. I'm all for fan art, though!

Originally, I was going to have Yume and Mizuto go out on a date, but when I actually got to writing, that never happened. After all, while I wrote, I realized that birthdays are much more important events for families than for couples. So, ultimately, the affair turned out much more laid-back than I'd originally anticipated.

The last illustration of the book is of a scene that I've wanted to write for quite some time. It was the first time in a while that I dictated the contents of the illustration. Witness what mutual one-sided love looks like, O world. Also, Mizuto's past gift to Yume was a pink book sleeve, so go take a look at the cover of the first volume of the series.

It was really fun not having to think about difficult topics and instead writing a straight-up rom-com. Next time, though, we'll be getting serious again and getting back on track with things that were foreshadowed in Volume 6. Well...maybe. Or maybe not.

You might have noticed that Kawanami and Minami didn't have much screen time in this volume, so next volume they...might be featured a little more. Or they might not. Beats me, honestly.

Anyway, this has been Kyosuke Kamishiro's *My Stepmom's Daughter is My Ex* Volume 7: *Just a Bit More Like This*. Why "just a bit more," though? Let's keep this going for another five volumes or so. Whaddya say?



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex ♪

"The six things I couldn't say"





Yume Irido
Mizuto's ex and now stepsister. Has successfully pulled off her high school girlfriend by becoming a beautiful honor student.

"What're you doing? Slacking off?"

"Uh... What kind of reaction are you looking to get from me?"

"Wouldn't you agree that stockings are more erotic than bare legs?"

"Hey, let go of my hand!"

"Oh, there you are!"

Kogure Kawanami
Watches over the relationship between Yume and Mizuto. A self-proclaimed "Romance ROM" specialist.

Akatsuki Minami
Kawanami's childhood friend and ex. Loves to toe the line with Kawanami's romance allergy.

Mizuto Irido
Yume's ex and now stepbrother. Dotes on his best friend Isana.

Isana Higashira
A loner light novel enthusiast. Though she was rejected by Mizuto, her existence is so powerful that even now, she's his girlfriend.



"All right,
I'm gonna
take another
nap."

Tohdo Hoshibe

A third year and the former student council president. As a college recommendation recipient, he's got nothing but time on his hands, leading him to frequently laze around the student council.

"You're
too close.
Please
move away,
Senpai."

"Aw,
the cold
shoulder?
Such a
cutie-pie!"

Aisa Aso

A second year and the vice president. She acts like a reliable upperclassman in front of her underclassmen, but around Hoshibe...

Ran Asuhain

A first year on the student council in charge of general affairs. Though proud of her good grades, she wants to surpass Yume in terms of ranking and sees her as a rival.

▶ Author
Kyosuke
Kamishiro

▶ Illustrator
Takayaki



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"Just a Bit More Like This"

7



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"The Six Things I couldn't Say"





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Senpai."

"Aw,
the cold
shoulder?
Such a
cutie-pie!"

Aisa Aso

A second year and the vice president. She acts like a reliable upperclassman in front of her underclassmen, but around Hoshibe...

Ran Asuhain

A first year on the student council in charge of general affairs. Though proud of her good grades, she wants to surpass Yume in terms of ranking and sees her as a rival.



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My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex: Volume 7
by Kyosuke Kamishiro

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